



**DARK • SUN**

THE

# BRAZEN GAMBIT

**Lynn Abbey**

Chronicles  
of Athas  
Book 1

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To Carolyn and Jane for a safe haven when I really needed it and Beverly  
for making Persian carpets.

## CHAPTER ONE

It was the 102nd day of the Descending Sun in the seasonless year on the Tablelands of the world men called Athas. Ral and Guthay, the sibling moons, had already slipped below the horizon. Through the clear, dry air, the midnight sky was as black as the Dragon's heart. The parched Tablelands were lit by the pinpoint brilliance of a thousand unchanging stars. The brutal heat of day yielded to the bone-numbing cold of night, as it had every other day in both living memory and enduring legend. Days, years, and mortal lives churned relentlessly from birth to death. The cycles were endless and invariable.

Nothing changed in Athas: What was would always be. The will of man or woman could leave no lasting mark upon the world. These were the laws seared into the understanding of each child born beneath the blood-red sun.

Yet Athas *had* changed, and recently. The dreaded Dragon, ancient beyond mortal reckoning, was gone. No more need a city-dwelling man or woman fear the Dragon's levy: the annual assessment of life, drawn without remorse from the legions of misfortune within each of the city-states.

Change had come in other ways as well. A citizen's council had replaced King Kalak in Tyr; that had happened before the Dragon died. It governed that mighty city-state and controlled its precious iron mines. The sorcerer-kings of Balic, Raam, and Draj had died with the Dragon. Anarchy ruled in their former domains. Mighty rulers still reigned in Urik, Gulg, and Nibenay, each keeping a suspicious eye on living neighbors and a covetous one on empty thrones.

And somewhere on the Tablelands during this cold crystal night the heavens raged and the bitter tears of Tithian I, fallen tyrant of Tyr and would-be successor to the Dragon himself, fell from black storm clouds, unintentionally nurturing the withered land.

But in all the Tablelands, change intruded least in the northeastern city-state of Urik.

The Sorcerer-King, Hamanu, had survived the Dragon's demise and the misfortunes that befell his fellow tyrants. In undimmed panoply, he had returned to his square city that lay within sight of the restless Smoking Crown volcano. Striding out of the shimmering wastelands, his massive body shrouded in an illusion half-human and half-lion, the king had mounted the highest tower in his domain and had addressed his subjects. His words, enhanced by the mind-bending power of the Unseen Way, had penetrated every mind, every shadowed corner of his city.

*Borys the Dragon is dead.*

Most of those who heard the resonant, echoing voice, had not known the Dragon had a name.

*The sorcerer Rajaat is dead.*

Fewer still recognized the name of that ancient human wizard, nor knew if Rajaat had been friend or foe before his death.

*I, Lord Hamanu—King of the World, King of the Mountains and the Plains, Lion of Urik, the Great King, the Mighty King, the Bringer of Death and Peace—I, your king, have returned safe and whole to rule my city. You need not fear the emptiness that replaces Borys and Rajaat. Though change has thrust itself upon Athas, you need not fear it. Change will not disturb fair Urik. You need fear only me, only when you disobey me. Worship me, your sacred eternal king. Obey me and live without fear.*

From the highest templars in their gilt-trimmed, yellow silk robes and the proud nobles sweating beneath their jewels to the least dung-seller and mangy street urchin, the Urikites responded with an almost spontaneous hymn of praise. Their ten thousand and more voices joined together were not so resonant as Hamanu's uncanny voice. Deep in their hearts, the Urikites knew the truth of their king's words: while the Lion of Urik held his domain in his taloned grasp, the city had nothing to fear but its own king.

In that regard, life went on in Urik exactly as it had for a millennium. It was true that fearsome storms had raged twice above the city walls in the two years since King Hamanu's return that dusty afternoon. The storms were seething, screaming monsters, with many-colored lightning that left brave citizens cowering in the corners of their homes. But the storms did not breach the towering yellow walls, and neither did anything else.

King Hamanu's word was as brutally honest as it had always been. Change in many forms might have come to the Tablelands, but it did not disturb his domain.

\* \* \*

A cool night breeze flowed from the dark desert and across Urik's open rooftops. Folk who, before sunset, had languished in whatever scrap of shade the city afforded, pulled cloaks high around their necks and hastened along cobblestone streets toward their beds. Here and there, throughout the mile-square city, a snarl or growl erupted as someone wandered too close to someone else's guarded property.

Silhouetted sentries from the templarite's civil bureau, their spears against one shoulder and shields hung on the off-weapon arm, patrolled the broad outer rampart walls. The damage wrought seven years earlier when Rikus of Tyr had led his ragtag gladiator army in doomed assault on Urik's heart had been long since repaired and blended seamlessly now with the older fortifications.

Better-equipped guards from the templarite war bureau stood watch along the narrower inner walls that divided Urik into segregated quarters, reserved for the nobles and the templars themselves, and common quarters for the rabble. Merchants, who held themselves apart from the entanglements and protection of citizenship, set aside their sunlight rivalries to mount a common watch in their own quarter. In the elven market, near the western gate, where trade never came to a complete stop, pungent fires crackled all night between translucent tents and shanties.

When the curfew gongs rang at midnight, law-abiding folk latched and double-latched their doors, if they had doors. Despite the loud claims of the civil bureaus that the streets of Urik were always safe, regardless of the hour, wise folk knew that after midnight Urik belonged to the street scum who were always responsible for their own safety, and to the templars who, in the opinion of many of those behind latched doors, were the worst of scum themselves.

Despite the curfew, or because of it, there were places within Urik that were only alive in the criminal hours after midnight. One such place was Joat's Den. Carved out of a corner of the hulking customhouse, convenient to both the Caravan Gate's plaza and the elven market, but not part of either quarter, the Den sprawled low to the ground and open to the sky.

A single grease-lamp above the door shone faintly on a cracked and peeling piece of leather that, in the bright sunlight, displayed the faded portrait of a gap-toothed dwarf brandishing a tankard: Joat himself in his younger days, when he'd been trying to attract customers.

The customers Joat got, then and now, were off-duty templars. And since the yellow-robes provided a steady, if undistinguished, trade in which there was little threat of competition or hope of expansion, Joat let his sign fade. For decades the dwarf had concentrated his entrepreneurial efforts on procuring the strongest inebriants at the lowest possible price.

Tonight he was serving broy, a liquor produced when kank nectar was left to ferment in the sun for a few days, then sealed in resin-smeared leather sacks. Broy was a pungent, slightly rancid drink with a cloying sweetness that coated the drinker's tongue for hours afterward. It was, to say the least, an acquired taste.

Unlike the liquors fermented from fruits or grains, broy produced quiet, melancholy drunks who stared at the stars, lost in introspection. As such, it was not the drink of choice at Joat's Den, where templars came to forget who they were, what they did. But the templars who frequented Joat's Den acquired taste and tolerance for whatever the old dwarf could scrounge, as long as it could kick like a broody erdlu.

Joat, himself, however, preferred the nights when broy was all he had behind the mekillot rib bar. Business was good, of course; it always was: when templars drank, they drank until they achieved oblivion. But when they drank broy, the furniture didn't break and the place stayed quiet as a boneyard.

Usually.

Through some quirk of fate, from a stool beside the hearth that Joat had deliberately refused to kindle, a customer had taken it upon himself to entertain everyone. The dwarf stood ready to toss the human youth into the back alley the moment anyone complained, but the mournful tunes the boy played on a set of pipes whittled from the fragile wing-bones of unhatched erdlus suited the overall mood.

The youth was halfway handsome and dressed in plain, drab-colored clothes rather than a sulphurous yellow robe. He could have been anyone, but he was a templar. Joat was sure of that. *He* hadn't hired any entertainment and though nontemplars occasionally came through his doors—his place had a certain reputation for discretion, if one didn't mind the regular clientele—no nontemplar would be foolish enough to sit here, surrounded by the most reviled denizens of the city, lost in his thoughts and his music.

The young templar's fingers arched delicately over his instrument. His eyes were closed and his body swayed gently in rhythm with the music that was as beautiful as it was unexpected.

*Strange*, Joat mused silently in a lull between refills, listening to the pipes. Where had he learned to play like that? And why?

Joat knew the templars as well as anyone who did not wear a yellow robe knew them. More specifically, he knew the under-rank templars from the civil bureau, who had only a few threads of orange or crimson, never gold, woven into the hems of their sleeves. Such folk came to his place to celebrate their infrequent promotions, gripe about their varied failures in the ruthless bureaucracy, and to eulogize their dead. There were, of course, other kinds of templars: aristocratic High Templars who inherited their positions and seldom ventured outside their private, guarded quarter,

ambitious templars who'd betray, sell, or murder not just ordinary citizens like him, but other templars, too...

And then there were Hamanu's pets: men and women to whom the ancient, jaded king gave free rein. Those pet names were whispered here, in Joat's Den, and feared above all others, even the king's.

The dwarf didn't particularly like his customers, but he knew them well enough to know that beneath the robes they were very much the same as other people. They made the compromises everyone made to survive in a world indifferent to life. He certainly didn't envy them. In his eyes their privileges couldn't outweigh the risks they took every day, clinging tightly to their little niche in Urik's grand bureaucracy.

King Hamanu decreed that nothing changed. In the larger sense, the king spoke the truth. But change was a constant in Joat's small world. He'd raised his family here, behind the customhouse. His wife still cooked all the food. His children helped in more ways than he could count. Five grandchildren slept in cozy beds beneath the pantry.

It hadn't been easy; he'd endured more hard years than he cared to recall. The templars were reliable customers, except when crop failures tightened supplies or one of Hamanu's chronic military campaigns put the whole city on war rations. Joat's Den had been burnt out twice, most recently when Tyrian hooligans had sacked the city, trying, without success, to free the slaves.

King Hamanu always got Urik set to rights, easing off on fines and taxes until trade was back on its feet again. The sorcerer-king didn't claim to have founded Urik, but he, and the templarate he *had* founded, nurtured the city with ferocious care. Urik survived; Urik's citizens survived. In the end, survival mattered more than the king's notorious cruelty or any individual templar's brutality.

Standing in the twilight of his life—his eyes a bit dimmer than they'd been in his youth, his hand a shade less steady when he poured from a full jug—Joat was proud of himself, of his Den, of their survival.

Or maybe it wasn't pride, just that forsaken, melancholy music.

The youth had entranced himself and everyone with his playing. He showed no sign of fatigue. Like as not, he'd pipe away until sunrise, unless someone stopped him. Melancholy music that produced melancholy customers who, in turn, produced no sales. Joat wiped his hands on the leather apron that covered him from neck to knees—and covered a variety of weapons as well. He selected a supple sand-filled sap from the apron's armory. The small weapon disappeared in a thick-fingered dwarven fist.

He was easing around the end of the mekillot rib bar, determined to solve the night's problem, when a woman's terrified shriek split the night. Every head came up—except for the musician's. The scream hung in the air a moment, then ended the way it had begun: abruptly.

A quick exchange of glances around the Den said it all: *Murder*. No spoken words were needed, nor anything else. Even if a templar had been interested in rescuing the woman, the odds against finding her were as long as the odds against saving her were short.

Templars were cautious gamblers, especially when their own skins might be on the line.

A blond templar—handsome except for his broken teeth—hoisted his tankard upside-down. A war-hardened elf (on the other side of the room, naturally) made the same gesture; and a third templar pitched a ceramic coin into the musician's half-filled cup. She called for a happier song.

An unanticipated chorus of slurred dissent erupted. To Joat's astonishment, a fair number of his rock-headed half-drunk customers were *enjoying* the unpaid performance. Who knew what they might have done if he'd sapped the youth into silence? Maybe he should put the word out that he was looking for a musician with a taste for melancholy.

Sighing through his unanswered questions, Joat returned the sap to its hiding place beneath his apron. He retrieved the ripe broy-sack from its hook behind the bar and started around the room, topping off any out-held tankard. He paused a moment at a table where the solitary templar's tankard stood empty.

"You ready?" he asked the top of one man's head.

The templar straightened, covering a wax-tablet with brawny arms, but not before Joat got a glance at it. Not that Joat needed to spy. This templar—he made it a point of honor not to know his customers’ names—didn’t come every night, but his routine, when he did come, never varied. He’d study the marks on a scrap of parchment, then attempt to reproduce them from memory on the tablet. He’d repeated the process as many times as necessary, rarely more than twice per scrap.

Joat recognized city-writing when he saw it: most people did. But script was forbidden to anyone not noble born or templar trained and he was careful to conceal those script—secrets he’d deciphered over the years.

Still, an intelligent man made assumptions.

The brawny, intense scribbler had a very mashed nose and lips that were scar-twisted into a permanent scowl. He didn’t seem the sort to be collecting love-notes from a noble lady (though Joat had seen stranger things happen in his Den), so his assumption was that the templar was studying magic.

Great Hamanu knew why a templar would commit magic scribbling into his memory. On second thought, though, if Great Hamanu knew of this would-be scholar’s hobby, then this templar would likely have been converted into parchment himself. The king granted a priestly sort of spellcraft to his templars, through what means an ordinary man did not care to guess. High Bureau scholars performed the esoteric research that enabled Urik to defend itself against the other city-states and the war bureau knew how to wield what the High Bureau and the king concocted.

But from everything Joat had ever overheard in his taproom, a lowly civil bureau templar entreated Hamanu for magic as seldom as possible.

And *always* regretted it afterward.

“You ready?” Joat repeated, holding the thong-closed spout of the sack over the templar’s grungy tankard.

Before the templar could answer yea or nay, another scream shattered the night’s calm. This scream wasn’t feminine or anguished or very distant. It was a sound of pure rage, nearby and coming closer. Entirely ominous.

Absently, expertly, Joat put a slip-knot in the thong before dumping the broy-sack on the studious templar's table. He slid his hand beneath the apron again, unsheathing a talon-knife with a blade half as long as his forearm. The weapon had scarcely cleared its sheathe when something loud and angry thrashed through the beaded curtain that served as his door. Joat saw that the shape was mannish rather than womanish, human rather than dwarven or elven, but mostly he saw the long, jagged-edge blade that ran with blood. The man belched nonsense about the sun eating his brain; he'd crossed the line from rage to unreason, slashing wildly at enemies only he could see.

Joat spared a worried glance for his own knife, which looked puny compared to the opposition, but the Den was his place. He'd go down if he had to, but he'd go down fighting. The Den was his focus, not merely the center of his mundane life, but the uniquely dwarven center of spirit as well. When a dwarf broke faith with his focus, his spirit found no rest after his death. It returned as a howling banshee to haunt the scene of his failure.

The last thing Joat wanted to do was bequeath a cursed tavern to his children and grandchildren. He flexed his fingers around the leather-wrapped hilt and took a cautious step toward the beaded curtain.

But Joat wasn't the only one easing toward the raver. The templars took a proprietary interest in Joat's Den. Though they could go wherever they wanted in the city, they weren't welcome in many other places. Any of the dwarf's regulars would bust the jaw of anyone who accused him, or her, of friendship, or some other soft-hearted sentiment, but there were fealties no one mentioned. Chairs, stools, and an occasional table overturned as the regulars lurched to their feet. Hesitation rippled through Joat's Den—as if every man, woman, elf, dwarf, human, or half-breed had expected to play the solitary fool and was stunned to be part of a group instead. The templars lost their natural advantage in that hesitation. The raver attacked the hapless musician who played dirges, but did not notice death approaching.

The youth screamed as the long knife came down across his arms. His fragile pipes slipped from his hands and were crushed by his own weight and that of the madman who fell atop him.

With a scream of her own, an elf templar broke ranks with her hesitant peers. The razor-sharp petals of a punch-knife bloomed between the fingers of both fists before she dived across the floor and plunged them into the raver's flanks below his ribs. Away from their tribe—and the templarate was as far from a tribe as an elf could get—Joat's elven regulars usually stood aloof from any brawl, but they had notions of loyalty and friendship no non-elf could hope to understand, and this particular one had evidently taken the musician's misfortune personally.

She seemed capable of finishing off the madman. Blood spurted from the punch-knife wounds, a reliable token of fatal injury, and she'd gotten a lethal arm around his neck. No one, including Joat, stepped forward to deliver a mercy blow.

But the madman they all believed mortally wounded writhed like a serpent in the elf's grasp. Forgetting the musician, who had survived the initial attack and lay moaning, curled around his blood-soaked arms, the raver brought the spiked pommel of his long knife down on the elf's undefended neck. She groaned once and went limp.

Oblivious to the blood streaming from his wounds, the raver got to his feet, holding his weapon too high, leaving his gut and legs unprotected. Anyone could see the inviting line of attack, but neither Joat nor any templar rushed to accept it. Something was seriously amiss: the raver should have bled to death by now.

Joat flexed his knees, sinking close to the ground—as only a dwarf could. He eased forward, brushing his bare feet in arcs that never lost contact with the dirt floor, never surrendered balance. The vital blood vessels and nerves at the top of the madman's weapon-side leg were his target, but he was careful not to give himself away by looking there. Silently invoking Rkard, last of the dwarven kings, for luck, Joat sank another handspan into his crouch and waited for the opportunity.

He felt himself fall, but neither saw nor remembered the blow that toppled him. The raver's long knife knocked his shorter weapon from his hand when he raised it in desperate defense. The stone-hard mekillot ribs of

the bar saved his life, blocking the long knife's cut. The composite blade broke from the force of the downstroke.

"Hamanu," someone swore and several other templars repeated the word.

The magic student, still standing at the edge of Joat's vision, had drawn a metal knife, not long enough to pierce the madman's guard but sufficient for defense against the broken, composite blade. The student grunted at another burly human who carried an obsidian-edged sword. This second templar nodded in reply, and gripped his sword with both hands, while the student played shield for them both. Working as a team, they backed the raver from his victims, then the swordsman dealt a swallow-tail slash that left the madman's weapon arm hanging by a mere flap of skin.

But, the madman kept to his feet—once again roaring his nonsense about the sun burning inside his skull. He used his remaining hand to pry his broken knife from the shock-clenched fist of his dangling arm. The templar pair stood in flat-footed stupor as the raver slashed the swordsman's face with the broken blade and backhanded the student into the nearest wall.

"Mind-bender!" another voice shouted, offering the only possible explanation for what they'd witnessed.

No one else took up the attack. The madman remained where he was, cornered, grievously wounded, undefeated, and just possibly indefeasible. Everything that breathed on Athas had a jot of mind-bending talent, but templars wisely left theirs un-nurtured. King Hamanu did not look kindly on powers that he could not bestow, or withhold.

The blond templar with the broken teeth shoved a hand deep into the neckline of his tunic and withdrew a ceramic object Joat had sincerely never hoped to see exposed in his establishment.

"Hamanu!" the templar cried loudly—not an oath but a prayer. "Hear me, O Great and Mighty One!"

Other templars reached for the thongs around their necks. Their medallions were alike—baked slabs of yellow clay into which the sorcerer-king's leonine aspect had been carved. While Joat trembled, the medallions

began to glow, and a pair of slanting golden ovals appeared above the open roof of Joat's Den.

His blood went cold in his heart: No man could see those eyes, that way, and hope to live.

*Flameblade.*

The words of invocation exploded in Joat's skull, compounding the headache he'd already gotten from the raving mind-bender. He closed his eyes in agony and missed the moment when the sorcerer-king's magic channeled through the medallion-holding templars. Joat felt the flames' wind and heat, heard their roar and the maniacal squeals of the madman. He smelled noxious magic. He could have opened his eyes—was sorely tempted to look—but wisdom prevailed, and he kept them tightly shut until the squealing ceased, then the flames, and only the stench of charred flesh and hair lingered.

"It is done," a quaver-voiced templar announced.

Joat opened his eyes. His own wounds were minor, though the leather apron would have to be replaced. Another elf knelt beside the musician who would clearly survive, but never play his pipes again. The elf who'd first risen to his defense remained where she had fallen, the victim of bad luck and the unique vulnerabilities of long, light elven skeletons. Joat bent down to close her eyes as he joined the crowd around the raver's corpse.

The blond templar who'd invoked the king's aid wore a scarlet thread in his sleeve and held authority the others respected. He knelt by the largely intact corpse, muttering as he peeled away charred strips of doth.

Granted, Joat hadn't been watching when the spell did its work, but he'd expected a smear of ash and grease, a charred husk at most. Instead, there was an emaciated man—impossible to guess his age with his skin hanging hollow from his bones—lying dead on the taproom floor.

"Should've cindered." One of the templars put words to Joat's misgivings. "There were five of us together. He shouldn't be more than dung in the dirt."

“He said the sun was eating his brain, and I believe it. Be glad *he* was feeling generous.” That from the swordsman with his fingers pressed tight against the gash in his cheek.

Those words provoked a round of muttering. The templars agreed Hamanu had to be told his boon had fallen short. The blond templar wasn’t volunteering, and neither was anyone else—which meant there was a bad chance Urik’s templars were going to let that particular burden fall on an ordinary citizen’s shoulders.

Weighing the alternatives, Joat squatted down beside the corpse. Between the shock and his aching head, he’d forgotten the words the madman had been shouting. Sometimes an ordinary citizen, scouring the markets for the cheapest liquors available, heard things before the templars heard them. Gritting his teeth, Joat pried the corpse’s mouth open and pulled out his tongue.

“Laq,” he said, rising to his feet and leaving the blackened, definitive symptom for all to see.

Someone hawked into the cold hearth, spitting out evil before it took root, the way peasant farmers did. Another swore and slapped fist against palm.

Like the black-cloud rains, Laq had appeared in Urik after the Dragon’s death and Hamanu’s return. The storms, violent as they were, held out the faint promise that someday water might again be plentiful in the Tablelands. Laq left no similar optimism in its wake.

At first no one had known what caused men and women of all races to stop eating, stop sleeping, and finally lose their wits entirely. Earliest speculation said Laq was a disease, or possibly a parasite, like the little purple caterpillars that did eat through their host’s brain.

But the worms turned their victims into blissful idiots, not raving madmen, and they didn’t turn his tongue soot-black from tip to root.

These days the rumormongers claimed that Laq was an elixir the nobles had concocted in a futile effort to wring more work out of their slaves. Supposedly the elixir worked, after a fashion, but strong, energized slaves

had a disturbing tendency to overpower their overseers; and when the slaves were deprived of their elixir, they became even more obstreperous.

For a second coin the mongers would claim that King Hamanu had issued a secret decree banning Laq without ever defining what it was. The king, they said, promised an unpleasant death to those who traded in it.

Joat was skeptical of two-coin mongers: the sorcerer-king didn't issue secret decrees about imaginary elixirs; he certainly didn't need a new excuse to get rid of those he didn't like, and *any* death at Hamanu's hands was unspeakably unpleasant. Still, something was seeping through Urik. Folk were starving themselves, going mad, and dying with dead black tongues.

"Never been one this hard to kill before," the magic student mused, no worse for his battering and standing, once again, beside his table, collecting his parchment scraps. "If it's Laq, something's been added. Something's been changed."

The dreaded word, more dreaded than Laq itself: change.

Imagine telling King Hamanu that his magic had been scarcely strong enough to bring down a starving human, then imagine telling him that there was something loose in Urik that had given madmen mind-bender's strength *and* the ability to throw off magic.

A sane man would make the corpse tell his own story. And it could be done. A sorcerer-king had ways of getting what he wanted from the dead, and ways of punishing them, too, but not even King Hamanu could unscramble a madman's wits.

Failing the corpse, send that ridiculous-looking student, who'd raised the whole uncomfortable possibility...

"Pavek!" the blond templar shouted, pointing at the table.

But Pavek was gone, with only swaying strands of beads in the doorway to say that he'd left in a hurry. A templar rushed into the alley after him. Joat scurried to the table, worried that he'd been stiffed, but—no. Though the parchment scraps and the wax tablet were missing, two chipped, dirty ceramic coins sat in their place. Joat swept them into his belt-

pouch. Then he made the rounds again, chivying the regulars to pay their tabs and pleading for someone to haul the corpses to the boneyard. They took the elf, and left him with the raver.

Joat hobbled to the bar, the ache in his head nearly balanced by the ache in his side. He probably had a few cracked ribs—nothing that wouldn't mend naturally in ten days or twenty. When it came to getting beaten up, there were advantages to being a dwarf. He felt under the mekillot rib for the sack where his wife kept the powder she smeared on their grandchildren's gums when they were cutting their teeth. Mixed with a bit of water and swallowed fast, Ral's Breath did wonders for aches that were too big to ignore but not serious enough for a sawbones or healer.

\* \* \*

Pavek heard his name followed by a string of curses. He'd heard worse and kept walking at the same steady pace, confident that no one seriously considered pursuing him. Templars didn't act without orders, the smart ones didn't anyway, and Nunk, the blond Instigator with the rotten teeth, wasn't going to issue any more orders tonight. Nunk wasn't bad, for an Instigator, and he wasn't stupid. He'd guess what Pavek meant to do, and leave him alone to do it. There wasn't going to be enough glory in this night's work to warrant a share of it.

The customhouse bordered one of the few neighborhoods that hadn't been rebuilt since the Tyrian gladiators sacked the city. It might be, eventually, but in the meantime its broken buildings swarmed with squatters. All sorts of folk wound up there. Some were hiding from creditors or templars, some were only temporarily down on their luck, but for most of them, the quarter was the last stop before the boneyard. They were too poor to be robbed and too desperate to risk robbing someone else.

Pavek paused on the brink of the rubble. He cocked his head, using the stars to fix his position relative to Joat's Den, then recalling the first scream, the murdered woman's scream.

There was little doubt in his mind that the raver had killed her before bursting into Joat's: the timing was right, the raver would have killed anything that crossed his path, and, witless as the madman was, the squatter's quarter was probably where he'd been living.

The footing here was more treacherous than any of the inhabitants. Leaving his metal knife secured in its sheath, Pavek started down a street still littered with fire-charred bricks.

By Hamanu's decree, Urik was a square city. Streets were supposed to intersect at squared angles, but the king's order had broken down in the squatter's quarter. The old streets were blocked with fallen walls, new paths wove drunkenly through the ruins.

Pavek took his bearings again and reconsidered his whole plan. This wasn't his job. He was a customs guard: third-rank Regulator in link's third-rate civil bureau, who spent his days making sure no one stole the city's bonded property without the proper signatures. He wasn't authorized to haul corpses up to the necromancers for interrogation, and he wasn't authorized to worry about Laq.

But he'd gotten a glimpse into the fire of the raver's mind just as he'd gone flying rump-first into the wall, and he'd seen the face of a woman torn apart with terror.

Find the woman, find some answers about Laq—that was his entire plan. Urik was all the home he'd ever have, and he didn't like the thought of its being overrun with ravers, especially mind-bending, magic-resistant ravers. Pavek had been face-to-face with King Hamanu just once in his life, when he'd gotten his first yellow robe. He'd have sworn there wasn't anything he feared more than his king, until he watched five templars focus flameblade spells on a black-tongued raver, without reducing him to ash.

Eventually, Pavek found what he was looking for: human, lying on her back, half in shadow, half in the pale starlight, one leg tucked demurely beneath the other, her neck so brutally torn and twisted that her face was pressed against the ground. Pavek moved her gently into the full starlight; his hands trembled as he turned her head back to a normal angle. The face matched the one the raver had blasted into his memory. The bureau

necromancers would be pleased: a sudden death—alive one heartbeat and dead the next—meant the dead-heart sorcerers would get useful answers to their questions.

Pavek closed her mouth and eyes, then closed his own, waiting for his nausea to pass before he tried to hoist her across his shoulder for the long hike back to the civil bureau's headquarters.

A scraping sound emerged from the nearby shadow: a leather sandal grinding on sand and broken bricks, but a smaller sound than anything full-grown would make. Pavek lunged low and caught himself an armful of human boy that he dragged into the starlight for closer inspection.

"Leave her alone!" the boy sobbed, pummeling Pavek ineffectively with his fists.

"I can't. She's been murdered. Questions have to be asked, answered. The man who did it can't help. His mind was gone before he died."

The boy went limp in the templar's arms as all his strength flowed into wails of anguish. Pavek thought he understood. He'd never known his father. His mother had done the best she could, buying him a bed in the templarate orphanage when he was about five years old. He'd hardly seen her after that, but he'd cried when they told him her crumpled body had been found at the base of the highest wall. There was a lock of her black hair beneath the leather-wrapped hilt of his metal knife.

But Pavek had forgotten the words for compassion, if he'd ever known them. Ten years in the orphanage, another ten in the barracks had erased such simple things from his mind. He squeezed the boy against his chest and thumped him on the head. He thought that was what his mother had done, once or twice, and the boy did grow quiet.

"Give me a hand. We'll take her to the civil bureau, then I'll find you a place—"

"The bureau!" Shocked out of his tears, the boy wriggled free. "Who are you?"

"Pavek. Just plain Pavek. Regulator—"

"A templar!"

The boy's fist shot forward, a small hard object striking just below Pavek's groin. He folded inward, barely staying on his feet as the boy scampered into the shadow. Not far. The footsteps didn't fade; they stopped. Pavek cursed beneath his breath as he slowly straightened his back and his legs.

"Boy—come back here. Urik's no place for a boy alone."

Pavek knew he was right, but words gasped through clenched teeth lost something of their effectiveness, and the orphan stayed where he was. When he was confident of his balance, Pavek removed a few ceramic coins from his belt purse, displaying them in the starlight.

"Look—you'll need these."

The boy didn't take the bait. Well, Pavek reckoned he wouldn't have taken it either, under similar circumstances. He dribbled the coins into the dirt for the boy to retrieve later, then, with a stab of pain through his midsection and a loud groan, he hoisted the corpse across his shoulders and headed back the way he'd come.

## CHAPTER TWO

Hot, sun-filled days came and went. The fist-sized bruise in Pavek's groin faded; so did the memory of who'd given it to him and why. He filled his memory with scribbling from the archive, not the dreary details of his own life.

Pavek was on morning duty in the vast customhouse, transferring hock-sized sacks of salt from one barrel to another, ticking off groups of five on a wax tablet as he went. His gut reaction was anger when the adolescent messenger interrupted him. The girl dropped to her knees. Slender, trembling arms thrust through the plain yellow sleeves of her robe and stretched across the floor to touch his feet.

"Forgive me, great one."

Pavek was a big man with limbs as thick-muscled as any gladiator's, but not a great one.

Sian, his mother, once said he'd inherited his father's looks, from which Pavek concluded that his otherwise unknown father was one ugly human. He couldn't blame his nose on his sire; his own stubbornness had gotten that part of him mashed more times than he bothered to remember. The scar that pulled his upper lip into a permanent sneer was an orphanage souvenir: a midnight brawl turned vicious. He'd given as good as he got. Both he and the other boy pretended they'd fallen out of bed.

Who knew what Sian would say if she could see her only child now? His cronies joked that the only promotion waiting for him was the one to intimidator, for which he was so, obviously well suited.

Intimidator. Templar of the eighth rank. Not if he lived a thousand years like King Hamanu. He was just plain Pavek, a third-rank, flash-tempered fool, and he'd never be anything more.

"Get up, girl."

He tried to help her, but she scrabbled away.

“Medea wants you.” The messenger hid her arms beneath the long panel at the front of her robe and regarded Pavek with a stare that was both defiant and defeated.

Pavek threw the three sacks dangling from his left hand into the barrel he was filling. He made a mark in the wax with his thumbnail and peeked into the barrel he was emptying. Ignoring the girl, he scooped up another handful of sacks.

“One... Two... Three...” He tossed them as he counted.

“She said *’now’*.”

“Four. Five. I’m counting, girl. *’Now’* happens when I’m done.” Another fingernail impression in the wax, another scoop of salt-sacks.

“I can count for you.”

“Yeah—for me and who else? Rokka? Dovanne? Metica herself? I go up there and find she doesn’t want to see my ugly face at all, then I come back here and find there’s half a barrel missing—with my mark on the roster. No thanks, girl.” Pavek tossed sacks as he spoke. “I’ve been down that road before.”

“Metica said *’now,’* great one, and I’ll catch it if you’re late. I’ll just count, I swear it. I’ll swear whatever you want. Put in a good word for me, great one?”

“Five. Pavek. Just plain Pavek, or Right-Hand Pavek—and if you think my good word will help you with Medea, you’re an even greater fool than me.” He clapped the salt dust from his hands and handed her the wax tablet. “If there’s less than two hundred when I get back, I’ll come looking for you, girl, and you’ll wish you were never born.”

She pushed back stringy locks of dull, brown hair, revealing a blood-crusted gouge along her hairline. “Gotta do better than that, Pavek, if you want to intimidate me.”

The salt-room had only a grease-lamp for light. It was hard to tell whether she was full-human or half-elf. Pavek guessed half-elf. Whatever attraction drew elves and humans together, it didn’t usually extend to their children. He’d never met a half-elf who wasn’t outcast by its mother and

father's kin alike. They were all orphans, and they scrambled for whatever crumbs of patronage they could get, just like him.

"Right," he said, rolling down his yellow sleeves, uncovering a slim collection of crimson and orange threads. "Two hundred, and seal the barrel when you're done."

"I could wait for you..."

"Don't bother."

Pavek left with the sound of laughter ringing in his ears. Maybe she would wait. Tomorrow was Todek's Day, so named for the largest of the outlying villages, which, according to the ten-day rotation that was as old as Urik itself, was scheduled to bring its produce into the city market.

More importantly, tomorrow was the one day in ten that he could claim for himself. He usually spent his free time in the archives, copying and memorizing spellcraft, but there were other ways to pass the time. She was only a messenger; he was a regulator. He couldn't put in a useful good word for her with Metica, but he could buy her a free day. A day with him.

Striding along the crowded streets between the custom-house and the stone-fronted civil bureau where Metica had her office, Pavek weighed the possibilities several times. Anything to distract him from thinking about the reasons his taskmaster want to see him.

If she did want to see him. The old adage about not trusting strangers held true in the bureaus. He didn't know the messenger.

Pavek paused at the bottom of the broad stairway leading to the administrators' chambers, mopping the sweat from his brow and shaking the dust from his robe, then started climbing.

A man got tired in the templarate. Pavek guessed he was about twenty-five years old, but he'd already accumulated a lifetime of tired. For once he thought of Metica not as a familiar adversary, but as a gray-haired half-elf, and wondered how she had survived—how anyone survived long enough to grow old. His life wasn't a choice between the half-elf girl and a day in the archives, it was a choice between any tomorrow and no tomorrow at all. Sometimes he wondered why he hadn't Mowed his mother's example,

except that when templars cracked—and one did from time to time—they didn't do it quietly or alone.

All at once and without warning, his thoughts were back in Joat's Place, watching the raver suffocate, and in the squatters' quarter, looking down at a woman with a broken neck. He swallowed the thoughts and kept climbing.

\* \* \*

"Sit," Metica said when his shadow touched the door-less threshold of her chamber.

Her back was to the door. A hot afternoon wind blowing through the open window in front of her lifted tendrils of her dull, gray hair. Pavék thought he'd been quiet coming up the stairs; he guessed he'd been wrong.

The seat in question was a tripod made from sinew-lashed bones that creaked and gave beneath his weight. He pretended to lower his weight onto the leather seat; every muscle tensed to maintain his balance in the unnatural position. He was painfully, shamefully, and deliberately low in his taskmaster's sight. His shoulders barely cleared the top of her worktable. He hadn't felt so small and powerless since he left the orphanage.

Surely Metica was after his hide.

"Our Mighty King's personal necromancer extends her thanks," Metica began, fixing Pavék with a chilling smile.

"The king's—?" he stammered: "I'm grateful, great one."

"The corpse, Regulator! The broke-neck corpse you found three nights' past."

"I brought her here, to the civil bureau. It was street crime, *our* crime. I even marked the roster—"

"Well, she wound up at the palace and—thanks to your mark in the roster—that black-hearted dead-speaker knew enough to send her pleasure to *me*."

Metica was after his hide, his life, and his eternal essence. The only thing that might appease her was a rounded heap of gold and silver coins, mostly gold. Pavek felt rich when he had a heap of ceramic bits.

“Thought you might like to know what she said.”

Pavek lifted his head in time to see the folded parchment Metica scaled his way, but not in time to catch it. He fished it off the floor without letting his eyes drift away from the half-elf’s face. Damned if she wasn’t *pleased* about something.

He opened the parchment, scanned the script. The necromancer had gotten the woman’s name, her man’s, and the name of their son, Zvain, which Pavek immediately associated with the boy who’d gotten away after punching him in the groin. The report confirmed that she’d been murdered by her man and that he’d been raving mad when the crime was committed. Nothing more.

It was hard to believe Metica was pleased; Pavek certainly wasn’t when he returned the parchment to her worktable.

“There should’ve been more,” he grumbled, risking Metica’s good humor.

“There was,” she confirmed. “What you gave the palace was better than gold. Not that the necromancer told me, mind you. But she was happy, no doubt of that.”

With a steady expression of disinterest fixed on his face, Pavek wondered how many lies Metica had just told him, and whether he dared ask her what was better than gold. “I did my duty, great one. Nothing more,” he said with lowered eyes and excruciating deference.

“In your dreams, Regulator, in your bloody dreams. I don’t want to know why you hauled that corpse up here. I truly don’t. You were lucky, not smart, Pavek—”

He looked up again. Last time Metica called him by his name he was only sixteen. She said he’d scored well on his bureau exams, said he had rare talent. Then she said she was almost sorry he was dirt-poor and without patrons.

*You'd rise with gold and connections, Pavek. As it is, you'll stay right here for as long as I want to keep you.*

"I don't want you pushing luck again," the half-elf continued. "You hear me? You stay smart and keep your rock-head down in the gutter where it belongs."

"Yes, great one. I don't know what got into me."

Metica settled into a sturdy chair. She shuffled scrolls, tablets and marking pens. "I heard there was scarcely a mark on him—except for that black tongue. Believe *that*, if you want. But the black tongue was what they called important, Regulator Pavek: a thread toward Laq. You stay clear of it now, if you're smart. You don't want to be near that thread when it gets pulled. You understand?"

"Yes, great one," he replied with absolute sincerity. But it had worked—his simple plan had worked! The days of mind-bending, magic-resisting ravers were numbered in Urik. That was all he'd wanted. It never paid to think too much about the middle when the ends were clear. "As far away as I can get," he assured his taskmaster, then started to stand.

"You can do something for me, Regulator, since you're so good at tracking things into shadows."

Pavek's heart sank and so did his body. He barely caught himself before he broke the flimsy tripod. "Anything, great one."

"We've had *complaints*," Metica let that unprecedented notion hang between them. "Complaints about the Ral's Breath powder our licensed apothecaries are selling. Seems it's not doing the job it's meant to do."

Pavek shrugged, and nearly lost his balance. "What job? Ral's Breath doesn't *do* anything. Tell a sick man he's getting better long enough and either you're right or he's dead." ...though he'd bought a few of the yellow powder packets himself. Work in the customhouse was usually more strenuous than tossing salt sacks, and Ral's Breath was cheap enough even he could afford it. "Stuff tastes awful until it numbs your mouth. Then you're so busy trying not to bite your tongue, you forget what else hurts."

“Well, apparently it doesn’t taste as bad as it’s supposed to and the rabble isn’t forgetting, they’re *complaining*. Our great and mighty king tolerates the sale of Ral’s Breath because it’s lucrative and because, unlike just about anything else that could be ground up and sold, the seeds it’s made from can’t be used to make anything else—anything *veiled*.”

She alluded to the Veiled Alliance, a loose-knit association of magic-users that was banned in Urik and everywhere else in the Tablelands.

Templars got the thrust for their spells directly from their sorcerer-king. Templar spells, Pavek knew from his archive research, belonged to the broad tradition of what the archive scrolls called clerical or priestly spellcraft.

But there was another spell-casting tradition, just as broad and in some respects more powerful than priestly spellcraft. At its apex, it was the magic of the departed Dragon and his minion sorcerer-kings. In lesser forms it was the magic of the outlawed Veiled Alliance. This other magic was completely inimical to clerical spellcraft, and Pavek knew little about it, except that every spell required specific ingredients.

And, as Metica had pointed out, since the outlawed Alliance magicians could wreak spells with just about anything, any substance that was useless to them was noteworthy. Small wonder, then, that King Hamanu allowed Ral’s Breath to be sold for city profit. Except—

“If these seeds are so useless, how can anyone truly tell if the Ral’s Breath has been overcut?”

“Useless to the Veil, Regulator, but as you said, the zarneeka seeds have a distinctive taste and numbing texture. Someone’s shrinking the amount of zarneeka that goes into every packet of Ral’s Breath. You’ll find out who, and why, and then you’ll tell me. As a favor to me... for my inconvenience dealing with the dead-heart. Simple?”

The sinews holding the tripod together creaked protest as all the implications of Medea’s “favor” sifted down through Pavek’s thoughts. Harmless, practically useless Ral’s Breath was a city commodity, stored in the customhouse and sold to the licensed apothecaries who resold it in their shops. If, the bitter, numbing ingredient in Ral’s Breath was zarneeka—a

word Pavek had never heard before—then zarneeka was also a city commodity, stored in the selfsame customhouse. Either the suppliers who sold zarneeka were shorting the city or the templars who made up the Ral's Breath packets were pilfering yellow powder. Pavek had his suspicions between the two possibilities—and his hopes.

“Where do we get zarneeka, great one?”

“Itinerants trade it directly for salt and oils.”

Pavek couldn't resist a frown: itinerants weren't merchants who paid city taxes and spelled out their names with trade tokens (and probably knew city-script, just as every civil templar knew the token code). Itinerants didn't even live in market villages where their lives were lived under constant observation. Itinerants dwelt beyond civilization, deep in the wastelands, in places that had no names. They were dirt-poor and as free as a man or woman could be.

Direct trade meant no coins changed hands when the itinerants exchanged their seeds for the other commodities, and that meant procurers from the civil bureau handled the whole transaction. There were at least twenty procurers working Urik's customhouse, but when Metica wouldn't meet his eyes, Pavek knew which one handled the zarneeka trade: the dwarf, Rokka.

If Rokka's dwarven focus—that innate need dwarves had to organize their lives around a single purpose—wasn't greed for gold, it was only because Rokka'd found something more valuable.

But zarneeka? Seeds that turned a man's tongue into a useless lump? Seeds that King Hamanu himself certified were useless?

Not if gold-hungry Rokka was involved.

Had Pavek been anywhere but Metica's chamber, he would have spat the evil thought into the nearest hearth.

Instead he recited an old street rhyme as casually as he could. “Itinerants: ‘Come today and gone away. Come again? Who knows when?’”

“They registered last night at Modekan.”

Coincidence? Pavek felt an invisible noose settle around his neck. He gulped; it didn't budge. Modekan was another of the villages that lent its name to one of Urik's ten market days. Today, in fact, was Modekan's day.

Coincidence? Not unless his luck had suddenly gotten a lot better.

King Hamanu didn't like surprises in his city. The massive walls and gates were more than convenient places to carve his portrait. Nobody came into Urik without registering at one of the outlying villages. Nobody brought a draft beast into the city; the streets were crowded enough with people, and hard enough on that account to keep clean. Nobody stayed inside the city after the gates were closed at sunset unless they paid a poll tax or could prove residence.

The great merchants paid the tax. For them, it was a pittance. Just about everyone else, including itinerants, stopped in a market village, stabled their beasts, announced their intent to visit the city to a civil bureau registrator conveniently assigned to the village inn, and then set out for Urik the following morning.

He assessed the angle of the morning sun streaming onto Metica's worktable. If he assumed the itinerants had set out from Modekan at dawn and weren't crippled, they should be approaching the gates right about now. He'd rather lose every thread of orange and crimson in his sleeves than poke his nose into Rokka's affairs, but he owed Metica. She'd made that perfectly dear.

"How many? Names? Descriptions?" He hoped for anything that might give him a chance to get out of this without earning the dwarf for an enemy.

"Three. One female, two males. A cart, four amphorae—large clay jugs with pointed bottoms-filled with zarneeka. They should be easy to spot coming through the gate."

Pavek supposed he should be grateful that the registrator had recorded so much extra information. He wondered, idly, how much Metica paid for that extra knowledge. And whether she'd told him everything she'd bought. "Anything else?"

The administrator pretended not to hear the question, instead of answering she selecting a stick of ordinary sap-wax from a supply in an expensive wooden box. She sparked, a little oil lamp—also expensive—and held the wax in its flame until it softened and shone. Pavék watched with morbid fascination. Metica was preparing to give him an impression of her personal seal.

He could think of worse omens... maybe...

If he tried hard.

“*What* else?” he rephrased the question as she dropped a viscous bead on a piece of slate and flattened it with a roll of her carved turquoise seal.

Metica rehooked her cylindrical seal onto the thong around her neck, where it hung beside her gold-edged medallion. She blew on the impressed wax to hasten its hardening, and smiled sweetly at her debtor.

Pavék held his breath.

“The amphorae are bonded—sealed at their point of origin. Be careful when you break them open. Take this to the gate—” She held out the molded lump of wax. It was about as long as Pavék’s thumb and half as thick. He took it like a death sentence. “You’re clever, Regulator. You’ll think of something. Don’t forget who you’re working for. I’ll be waiting for you tomorrow.”

“I’m off tomorrow,” he replied, feeling like a fool as the words left his mouth.

Her smile grew broader, showed teeth filed down to sharp, precise points. Pavék had never noticed his taskmaster’s teeth before, but then, he’d never seen her smile like this before.

“Then the day after tomorrow. You’ll know twice as much by then, won’t you?”

Sap-wax didn’t hold a sharp image for more than a day in the oppressive Athasian heat. The way Pavék’s hands were sweating, the impression would be gone by the time he got to the gate. He quickly tucked the wax into the slit hem of his sleeve. When the wax was out of harm’s

way, he got to his feet. He was at the threshold when he remembered the messenger.

“The girl you sent. She asked me to put in a good word for her.”

“And do you?”

“Yeah—she’ll make a fine regulator someday.” There was more irony in his voice than he’d intended, and more anger than was wise.

“I didn’t send a messenger,” Metica replied, losing her smile.

\* \* \*

Pavek was acutely conscious of the little wax lump in his sleeve as he made his way past the customhouse—he hadn’t stopped to see if the girl was waiting or if she’d stolen all the salt—to the western gate. Modekan was west of the city. Its villagers used the western gate when they brought their produce to market. So did anyone who’d registered at the Modekan inn, unless they wanted to walk the extra distance to one of the other three midwall gates.

The city’s main avenues were filling quickly with the usual market-day traffic, but a templar in his yellow robes had little difficulty moving against the traffic—as long as he didn’t mind the glowers of contempt and the constant splatter of hawking as his shadow passed.

A regulator had the right to answer any challenge to templarate authority with a fine or corporal punishment. But, like the right to call upon King Hamanu for magical aid, it was a right that only a fool would choose to exercise. Pavek contented himself with a purposeful scowl and kept an eye out for two men and one woman pulling a cart loaded with cone-bottomed clay pots. Unless they’d chosen to drag their heavy cart along the narrower side streets, the zarneeka traders had yet to pass through the gate.

The regulator in charge of the western gate, a grizzled human whose robe sleeves matched Pavek’s except that they were frayed and threadbare, accepted Metica’s wax without enthusiasm. He snapped the wax in half and

tossed the pieces into a filthy bowl where they were lost in a handful of similarly broken lumps.

“What’re you looking for?” he asked Pavek, hawking into a fire pit for good measure.

“The usual. I’ll know them when I spot them. Give me an inspector. I’ll keep him busy. Anything in particular you’re on watch for?”

“The usual,” the older regulator replied with a wink, then he shouted a name, “Bukke!” and an inspector joined them in the gatehouse.

The new man was human with spiked, sun-bleached hair and pale, mean-spirited eyes. There was a distinct family resemblance between the two, especially when they stared. Bukke was a big man, accustomed to looking down into another man’s eyes, but he wasn’t bigger than Pavek, who let his scarred lip curl and held Bukke’s stare until the younger man turned away.

“I’ll tell you which ones to roust out of line. You lead them aside for a shakedown, and do a thorough job of it, like I’m sure you can, while I watch from here.”

“What am I looking for?”

“You’re not. You do what you’re told until I give you the sign to stop. Understand?”

The inspector looked around, but his father had left the gatehouse, and he was alone with someone who gave every indication of being at least as mean as he was. “Yeah. Right.”

\* \* \*

Throats grew parched and tempers frayed as the bloated red sun climbed toward noon. At the nod of Pavek’s head, Bukke harassed every threesome composed of two men and a woman, every jug-filled cart, and a few hapless journeyers who didn’t fit the pattern at all, just to confound any rumors that might be drifting back along the road to Modekan. Squinting

toward the horizon, Pavek saw an occasional swirl of dust where someone turned around.

Three someones?

Three someones with a cart of zarneeka? They were itinerants, people who dwelt in the trackless land beyond Urik's verdant belt. They'd come a long way to register their intent at Modekan. Pavek was counting that they'd come the rest of the way no matter what rumors filtered down the road. Metica said their amphorae were bonded and sealed; by rights they had nothing to fear from King Hamanu's templars.

Pavek's gaze fell upon a family of farmers—a man with a withered arm, his wife, grown children, half-grown children, and a suckling infant. They were too poor to have a cart, but carried their goods on their bent backs. It felt like a good time to vary the pattern. Pavek stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled for Bukke's attention. The inspector dismissed the carters he'd been harassing.

The younger children started crying, but the family shuffled forward. Their eyes showed hollow despair when Bukke slashed their bundles with his obsidian-edged machete. They were people; they had lives. If they were freemen, those bundles were everything valuable they owned. If they were slaves, they'd have to answer to their master for the loss.

Pavek turned away, remembering Metica's sharp smile; *he* had a life, too.

A scuffle erupted in the clearing where Bukke was making his inspection. Pavek was slow to turn—slow to grasp what had happened. One of the bundles was stuffed with chameleon skins, changeable bits of leather worth their weight in gold to any sorcerer—and absolutely proscribed in Urik.

Bukke's father pronounced sentence: the man was executed on the spot—with that arm he'd be no good in the obsidian pits. The woman and walking children were condemned to sale in the slave market. Bukke seized the squalling infant by its leg.

The mother wailed loud enough to wake the dead. She offered her life for the life of her child. A poor bargain that no one would take: a slave that couldn't walk or feed itself had even less value than a man with only one good arm, while she was still strong and healthy. Bukke pressed the black edge of his blade against the infant's throat. The screams subsided into anguished moans. Then another woman broke from the line. She was a dwarf; the infant was human. She had a single silver coin.

"Please let it be enough?"

Bukke hesitated. A templar had the right to kill, but not the right to sell and, anyway, both his hands were full.

"Take it, damn you," Pavek shouted. He surged out of the gatehouse, but stopped short of physically intervening. "We're not butchers."

*That* raised a few heads down the line. Some because templars didn't usually quarrel in public; but most because most nontemplars were convinced that templars had a long way to climb before they could be lumped in with honorable butchers.

Bukke released the infant's leg. He had the silver coin, and the dwarven woman had the infant in an eye-blink. The infant's mother crawled across the sand; she wrapped her arms around Pavek's ankles and called upon the immortal sorcerer-king to bless him.

Bukke tightened his grip on the gore-clotted machete. The air in the clearing was too thick to breathe and hot enough to burn of its own. Pavek gauged Bukke as an opponent, and wondered if he were good enough to take out the young inspector and his father with a small, metal knife.

He surely couldn't do anything with a hysterical woman clinging to his feet. He kicked free and went for his knife beneath the front panel of his robe.

Then Pavek saw them—it was like a gong striking behind his eyes—beyond Bukke's shoulder. Two men: a dwarf as old as Joat holding the traces of the cart and an adolescent half-elf, a scowl full of bile and vinegar, typical of his kind. And a woman...

A certain man could forget that his life was in danger looking at that woman. A certain man nearly did, but Pavek caught himself when Bukke's arm moved. The metal-blade knife had found its way into Pavek's hand without his conscious effort and, thanks-be to his nameless father, he looked like he meant to use it. Bukke lowered his machete.

"Them," Pavek said, pointing to the threesome. "Inspect them."

The half-elf, an exotic specimen with coppery hair a few shades darker than his skin, fairly glowed with rage. He had his walking staff raised for an attack—a coherent well-directed attack, Pavek noted in the back of his mind: someone had taught this boy stick-work. Still, he would have been cut in two if the woman hadn't gotten her arms around him in a hurry. She wasn't old enough to be his mother and didn't look to be his sister—though kinship between humans and half-elves was sometimes hard to catch in a single glance, and that was all Pavek got as the dwarf dragged the cart into the clearing. Pavek caught the dwarf's eye for less than a heartbeat—long enough to see a wariness that had nothing to do with surprise or fear.

He knew who had taught the kid, and he *knew* he had the right threesome even though the cart was topped with straw and rags.

"Search it!" he commanded, and Bukke did, with vengeance.

Four amphorae, their baked clay walls made waterproof with a layer of glistening lacquer, soon lay exposed in the dust. Their necks were plugged with deep-red wax into which a carved seal bearing a familiar leonine profile had been impressed.

"Bust 'em open?" Bukke asked.

Pavek took a deep breath. His plan—the plan Metica implied in her chamber—required breaking tie seals, not the vessels themselves. Some seals were simply wax; anyone could break them, but some were spiked with sorcery. They could leave a man with stumps where his hands had been and leave an image of his agonized face where the sorcerer could find it. Pavek knew the risks, so did Bukke. Breaking the amphorae would scatter the powder in the sand. If it was Rokka rather than the itinerants who were responsible for overcutting Ral's Breath, there'd be no way to prove it.

“Have the woman break the seals,” Pavek said, the inspiration bursting into his thoughts.

The woman strode past Bukke, calmly adjusting the shoulder of her gown where Bukke had torn it in his determination to do a thorough inspection. Her eyes, and her anger, never left Pavek’s face, but she said nothing as she knelt down beside the amphorae.

The half-elf hurled a curse at Pavek that should have cost one of them his life. He surged forward. Bukke reached for his machete. The dwarf grabbed the half-elf before harm could be done.

Pavek saw it all as a blur; his clear vision never left the woman. He watched her hands, even when the torn cloth at her shoulder came loose again. He couldn’t have said what he expected to see: a flash of light, perhaps, some other sorcerous signature—something he could pass along to Metica when he saw her. With the half-elf still cursing up a storm, the woman placed her palms on the ground. She closed her eyes and nothing happened. Just as nothing happened when she took the ribbons locked inside the deep-red wax and pulled the plugs out, one after another, as if they were no more dangerous than the sap-wax Metica kept in the box on her work-table.

As if, but not hardly.

All those off-duty days spent in the bureau archives weren’t a complete loss. Pavek couldn’t put a name to what he’d seen, not a specific spell name, but that woman kneeling there, looking at him with just a trace of real anxiety in her eyes now, was no common itinerant. She’d called upon the land of Athas to take back the spellcraft she or someone else had placed in those seals.

She was a druid.

“Do you want a closer look?” she asked, sitting back on her heels, leaving the torn doth of her gown as it had fallen.

He did and he didn’t, in more ways than one. He thought of ordering Bukke to shove his hand into one of the amphorae, but one look at that young man’s face and Pavek put the notion out of his mind. Returning his

knife to its sheath, he knelt opposite the druid. Her breathing was deep and even; she didn't blink when he reached as deep as he could into the powder. He brought up a handful. It was as yellow as the powder showing in the other three. Pavék touched his tongue to the little mound in his palm, then sprang to his feet retching for all he was worth, and to no avail.

Everyone—templars and travelers alike—got a good laugh at Pavék's expense. The only ones who didn't laugh were the forsaken, almost forgotten, slaves kneeling near the farmer's corpse, and their despair was worse than laughter. Pavék had his hands against his throat. He'd coughed so hard he was sure he was bleeding from the mouth, but he couldn't feel anything from his lips down to his gut.

"Find what you were looking for, regulator?" Bukke asked sarcastically.

Pavék's eyes were watering. He couldn't talk; he could hardly breathe.

"Do we have your permission to go on about our business?" the druid asked. She'd already replaced the wax plugs, probably re-spelled them, too.

The best Pavék could manage was a nod and a wave in the general direction of the open gate before he staggered to the cistern and thrust his whole head into the stagnant water.

## CHAPTER THREE

The tongue-thickening numbness in Pavék's mouth was gone long before the bitter taste of zarneeka faded into memory, along with the jeers of Bukke and the others at the gate.

He was accustomed to such outbursts. His pursuit of spell-craft—which he could not hope to invoke—invited ridicule. The archive scholars laughed when he mispronounced the names of the scrolls he wanted to study. His comrades in the low ranks of the civil bureau laughed because he was that most ludicrous of supposedly sentient creatures: a big, ugly, and dirt-poor templar with a romantic curiosity.

And compassion—at least more compassion than was considered useful or wise in the templarate.

Pavék cared about the widow and her children, now headed for the obsidian pits. He was ashamed that his scheme to catch the zarneeka itinerants had netted a clutch of hard-scrabble farmers instead. There was no reason, Pavék told himself, for the dull ache in his heart: the family was smuggling for the Veil. Nothing worse than the usual templar harassment would have befallen them if they had not been breaking one of Urik's cardinal laws.

Their fate was their own damned fault, not his.

But Pavék cared; he ached, and the family's faces joined countless others in the tiers of his conscience. The female druid, with her smoldering eyes and torn dress was headed there, too. The orphan boy who'd gut-punched him a few nights back had already claimed his place.

Wincing under his private burden, Pavék pounded the streets between the gate and the customhouse. His size and expression cleared a path, while a small voice inside his skull warned with every stride: *Forget them all. Take care of yourself. Forget them all.*

He slipped through an inconspicuous door at the rear of the customhouse and wove his way past stockpiles of those commodities King

Hamanu judged both essential to his city's residents and eminently taxable. The customhouse was larger than the palace, though few guessed its true dimensions because it had been carved into the limestone beneath the streets rather than rising above them. It swallowed the lives of poor, patronless templars, and Pavek, already a ten-year veteran of the templarate's bottom ranks, knew every dim and twisted corridor, every rat-hole shortcut. No one could have reached the imposing procurate tables in the entry hall faster than he did, but it was Rokka's predictability rather than Pavek's luck or skill that got him where he wanted to be before it was too late.

Rokka made everyone wait. The smarmy dwarf would make King Hamanu wait in line, even if it got him killed. Today he was making everyone wait even longer: two empty tables flanked the one where the miser had enthroned himself. A line of citizens and merchants stretched onto the sunbaked street.

Pavek glanced at the array of trade goods heaped behind Rokka's chair. There were no amphorae, neither lacquered nor resealed with loose wax plugs. None of the hot, weary faces matched the itinerants from the gate.

Pavek sighed with satisfaction and relief, then joined a pair of fellow regulators marking time in the coolest corner, near a row of massive chests. Taking orders from Rokka was a regulator's nightmare; the two were willing to let him stand duty in their places, no questions asked. They left the customhouse on a wave of his hand.

The lone procurer was a crude man. Curling bristles sprouted from his brow. Tufts of matted hair protruded from his ears and nose. Any other self-respecting dwarf would have plucked each offensive hair out by its root, but Rokka wore his hideous hair like armor. It fueled the contempt that oozed with every word, every gesture.

Even the proud merchant standing in front of the table when Pavek entered the hall had been reduced to a nervous pallor by the time the assessment was concluded. Rokka made a scratched entry on the tax scroll for the merchant to witness before he waved a two-fingers-extended fist in the air above his shoulder. Taking an empty pouch from a pile beside the

chest, Pavek filled the pouch with two nearly level measures of salt, then—because it was Rokka sitting at the procurer’s table—he let some trickle back into the chest.

The dwarf scowled when Pavek appeared at his side to put the pouch in one pan of a balance scale and two ceramic lions in the other. All eyes were on the balance beam, which swung a few times before the pans settled as close to level as mortal eye could determine.

Rokka smiled and nodded. Pavek simply smiled. With practiced efficiency he knotted the pouch thong and immersed it in a crucible of molten wax. He sealed the wax with the regulation customs stamp: a mekillot leg bone that had been carved into the form of a rampant lion. The customhouse entry-hall echoed with the resonant sound of the seal impressing the wax. The merchant made a hasty escape with his salt ration.

“What brings you up here, Regulator?” Rokka asked before the next petitioner came forward. He slid the lightweight tokens off the pan.

Pavek shrugged. He returned the bone seal to its golden stand. “The usual, great one. Pure rotted luck.” There was no particular enmity between them, mostly because Pavek had been careful to avoid moments like this.

“You know the drill?”

“In my dreams, great one. In my dreams.”

The procurer squinted one eye, trying to figure if Pavek and an angle and whether that angle crossed his own in any unwelcome way. Pavek transformed himself into a study of disinterest and boredom, and after a moment Rokka’s face relaxed without becoming friendly. “See you stay awake. We’re short-handed already—” He indicated the empty tables. “Who knows who might be waiting outside?”

“Who indeed, great one? I know what’s expected of me.” Their gazes locked another moment, then Pavek took the empty pouch the merchant had left behind. He did know the drill and performed it flawlessly, until Rokka’s smile seemed almost genuine and he began to fear that the procurer would *request* his assistance in the future.

Mostly Pavek measured short-weights of salt, an especially precious commodity in the hot, arid Tablelands; but sometimes he poured volatile oils into glazed ceramic flasks, and once he filled a sack with caustic soda from the obsidian mines for the gluemaker who transformed all manner of rubbish into his sticky wares. No apothecaries came to Rokka's table for Ral's Breath packets, but around midafternoon the beautiful, brown-haired druid led her two male companions, each balancing a brace of amphorae on his shoulders, to the far side of Rokka's table.

Pavek looked the other way as soon as he spotted them, although there was little chance he'd be recognized. Ordinary folks seldom looked farther than the detested yellow robe every templar wore while on duty. Still, the woman was a druid and, therefore, not at all ordinary.

Hovering by the commodity chests with his back to the procurer's table, he finger-raked his hair until it hung in front of his eyes, then rolled up the tell-tale sleeves of his robe.

The druid woman didn't wilt in Rokka's scorn. When the dwarf tried to reject the amphorae because their seals were obviously broken, she described what had happened at the gate. Her description of him as a "dung-skulled baazrag masquerading as a human" seemed excessively insulting, but it did leave Rokka at a momentary loss for words. She issued a soft-spoken ultimatum in the silence.

"If you won't accept the trade your fellow templars tainted, then we shall be compelled to take it back with us when we leave Urik. You will understand, of course, that it will be another sixty days before we can possibly return."

Every mote of curiosity in Pavek's mind craved a glance at her face. He *wanted* a good look at anyone who could play the procurer's game and win. Previously his only knowledge of druidry had come from such druid-written scrolls as the archive scholars had acquired over the ages. He knew they used the latent power of Adias itself in their spellcraft, which' was, in essence, identical to the priestly spellcraft the sorcerer-king permitted his templars. For that reason alone, he'd assumed they were like templars in other ways.

He succumbed to curiosity's temptations. The druid wasn't overtly defiant or proud; the lowliest messenger could conquer defiance or pride. Her voice was meek, her eyes lowered, never challenging the dwarfs authority.

And she had Rokka rattled. The dwarf drummed on the table and squirmed in his chair. By law, Pavék should have intervened: he knew what she was. One word whispered in Rokka's ear and the druid would wish she'd been sent to the obsidian pits before the dwarf was done with her.

Templars were, however, only responsible for enforcing Urik's laws, not obeying them. Pavék stayed right where he was, listening to Rokka's threats and insinuations, while the woman's expression never changed. He thought the procurer would reach for his medallion, but incredibly, Rokka caved in. The dwarf said Urik needed what was in those amphorae, sealed or tainted; he accepted the unsealed amphorae. After the woman's companions had laid down their burdens, Rokka held up four fingers for salt, then three for the volatile oil.

Pavék considered upright measurement: he was that impressed by the woman's accomplishment, but he rejected the notion. Rokka's weights were light. Any honest efforts on his own part would only focus the procurer's frustration on his own head. And the dwarf was undoubtedly looking for someone to blame.

Keeping his eyes as carefully lowered as the druid woman had kept hers while she wrangled with Rokka, Pavék set two salt pouches on the balance pan. They were a few hairs heavy, not enough for argument. While Pavék sealed one, Rokka reached for the other, presumably to knot the thong. But the procurer was a master in his own right. Pavék, standing at his shoulder, almost missed the glint of gold as Rokka dropped three coins into the pouch before sealing it. Without thinking Pavék shot a glance at the woman. Her look said that she knew about the gold, and that she recognized him. He expected to be denounced on the spot as a dung-skull baazrag, but the moment passed quietly, and he set amber-glass flasks in the balance pan, weighing his perceptions as he weighed the oils.

Pavek had come away from Metica's chamber convinced that if Rokka wasn't skimming the zarneeka, the itinerants were: one or the other, not both in collusion. But the itinerants weren't simple nomadic traders, and Rokka was slipping gold into an already generous ration of salt. Maybe they *were* working together, playing a dangerous game against Urik?

He pulled his hands back from the scale, allowing the pans to swing free.

If it was a ruse, the whole confrontation had been an elaborate ruse. Pavek didn't know if disassembling was a common skill among druids, but it wasn't among dwarves or procurers. When the brown-haired druid threatened to take her zarneeka away with her, Rokka had been mad enough to kill. Then he'd capitulated.

Urik's inhabitants needed Ral's Breath, but Rokka wouldn't give a gith's thumb for Urik or its inhabitants. *Rokka* needed zarneeka, and not, Pavek guessed with certainty, for Urik's sake.

The pans leveled. Pavek sealed the flasks with wax, then pushed them toward the woman without meeting her eyes. He'd gotten two steps toward the lacquered clay jugs lying on the floor when Rokka called him back.

"I'll handle that, Regulator," he said, rising too quickly from his chair. "You take my place here."

It was unheard of: A regulator standing a procurer's duty, Rokka toting four heavy amphorae on his own broad shoulders.

"Never think of it, great one. It's not my place."

"Make it your place and maybe you'll keep it, Regulator. You're so good with writing—all that practice. Scribble-scrape. Scribble-scrape. What else you got to show for it? Ink stains on your fingers? Or has our Great and Mighty King promised you a place in the archives—? Scholar Pavek—sweeping bug-dung off the floor."

As dwarves went, Rokka was soft-muscled. Maybe Pavek could best him hand-to-hand, maybe he'd need a heavy stick. But the risks were unacceptable, and King Hamanu frowned on templars brawling in front of the rabble, and the king's frowns were often fatal. So, Pavek let the procurer

pass. He settled himself on the chair's leather cushion, still warm and molded to the dwarf's differently shaped anatomy.

The druid and her companions were already out the door. Pavek called for the next in line. His script was better than Rokka's, and he was more efficient—dragging the salt-chest up to the table so he could negotiate, sign, measure, and seal, all without standing up. He simplified the negotiations, too: asking each petitioner what he or she was due, then shaping his scarred lips into an impressive snarl until the poor sod lowered the request.

The city's tax-paying rabble was clever. By the fifth petitioner, the transaction had been completely ritualized and the line moved at unprecedented speed. Every time Pavek spun around to reach into the salt chest, he expected to see Rokka's bandy legs and wrinkled robe, but the procurer was taking his time.

\* \* \*

In fact, Rokka took the whole afternoon.

The last petitioner was a dark silhouette against a sunset ruddy sky as he departed the customhouse. Pavek blew out the flame beneath the crucible. He waited until the sky was a lurid purple before locking all the chests and dragging them to the nearest wardroom.

Rokka still hadn't returned when the night guards assumed their posts. They shot a few sidelong glances his way, and he returned the favor. Templars were suspicious of each other and any deviation from routine.

They were also inclined to let those suspicions fester. Casual questions were unthinkable.

Pavek considered reporting directly to Metica. He knew her billet in the templar, quarter and he thought he knew enough about the zarneeka trade. If he got lucky, he'd discharge his debt, catch a midnight meal at Joat's, and spend his Todek's Day off in the archives as he'd planned.

And if he wasn't lucky? If he hadn't learned enough? He could see the administrator's arched eyebrows pull together like a kank's mandibles when

he mentioned those gold coins—if he mentioned those gold coins.

And if he didn't...?

And if she found out he hadn't...?

Ignoring the elven guards who were ignoring him, Pavek opened a minor door and descended into the catacombs. The only lighted lamps hung in the stairways, those in the corridors had been extinguished to save precious oil. Bone torches were stacked at every landing. He selected one that was sturdy enough to double as a club, then lit the pitched straw wrapping, acutely aware that a torch was a better target than light source.

Humans were at a distinct disadvantage in the dark. The other Athasian races saw heat as well as light and had far keener night vision. If it had been simply a matter of getting to a specific location within the catacombs, he would have foregone the torch. Magic locks sealing the more valuable commodities in their storerooms shed enough eerie light for a cautious man. But Pavek didn't know where Rokka or the zarneeka had gone; he needed light to find them.

Light, that simplest of all spells, was still a gift from the sorcerer-king and not worth requesting.

He started down the long corridor, stabbing his torch into every shadow. He rehearsed his excuses: Rokka had seemed unwell. Rokka had left him, a mere regulator, in charge of the procurer's table. Rokka had not returned from the storerooms, and he, a dutiful regulator, had not dared leave the customhouse until he'd gotten the procurer's countersignature on the tax scroll.

Only a complete fool would believe he was actually looking for the dwarf, but in the strained society where templars dwelt, plausibility was more important than either belief or truth.

Pavek saw things he would be careful not to remember. He interrupted a small number of storeroom trysts. High-rank templars married and raised families, but low-rank templars, living their lives in barracks and competing ruthlessly for such crumbs of patronage as slipped through the cracks, made do with empty storerooms and empty affairs. He'd never know the number

or names of his children, if he had any. A woman of similar rank could not raise an infant. Her children wound up in the templarate orphanage or on the streets.

He muttered apologies and kept going.

Midway through the third tier, he found what he was looking for: a warding that shed more light than his torch, and a glimpse of lacquered amphorae through the door grate. With his fingers folded thoughtfully over his mouth, Pavek studied the warding from a safe distance. Rokka had sufficient rank to ask for such potent spellcraft, but unless the dwarf had been spending all his spare hours in the archive, like Pavek, he shouldn't have known how to cast it. Even templars' borrowed spells were more than invocations. Complex spells, such as warding, were as individual as signatures or fingerprints. The warding on the amphorae storeroom was subtle and, therefore, not Rokka's style.

A High Templar would have both the rank and requirement to protect his private chambers with such an intricate warding. Here in the customhouse catacombs, it was going to raise a lot of eyebrows come daylight.

If it hadn't been dispelled before then.

Pavek spotted a likely hiding place amid a cluster of empty barrels. He extinguished his torch in a sand-bucket, but kept it with him as a weapon. Too bad there was no meat left on the bone. Excluding the zarneeka, he hadn't eaten anything since breakfast, and his churning stomach was noisier than the catacombs vermin. Digging into the belt-pouch beneath his robe, he found several sticks of stale chord sausage. The spicy, salted meat quieted his gut, and left him half-mad with thirst.

Cursing himself, Rokka, the sorcerer-king, and everything else in Urik, Pavek hunkered down. A length of coarse-woven canvas spilled out of one barrel. He draped the musty cloth over his bright robe and settled in for an uncomfortable night's spying.

His mind went as blank as any overworked slave's, and stayed that way until footsteps and torchlight roused him. At least four individuals were trooping down the stairs. They weren't talking, but from the sounds, two of

them were leather-shod and another was heavy enough to be a half-giant. Pavék had figured the worst would be a face-to-face encounter with Rokka, or Rokka's contact; he hadn't figured on a quartet, especially a quartet with a half-giant. He wished he were anywhere else.

Wishing didn't help. After confirming that he was still covered by the canvas, thereby obscuring his visual shape and his heat signature from the dwarf's inhuman vision, Pavék eased forward for a better look. Rokka led with the torch. Behind him was a tall figure whose identity was concealed by a grotesque mask.

His heart skipped a beat when he saw the mask.

Questioners sometimes hid behind masks; necromancers always did. Pavék told himself the mask might be a low-ranked templar's clever disguise. He didn't convince himself.

Between flickering torchlight and the billowing robes, Pavék couldn't get a clear glimpse of the third member of the quartet, but the fourth was, unmistakably, a half-giant, bent and cramped within the ten-foot corridors and lugging two barrels virtually identical to the one behind which Pavék was hiding. He crouched lower, hoping against hope that the quartet was headed somewhere else, but they stopped between his hiding place and the storeroom. He smelled the bitter essence of arnica as someone, most likely the masked templar, dispelled the lock.

"Hit me again with that damned barrel and you'll finish your life in the mines!"

Pavék gasped. Hamanu's infinitesimal mercy—he'd hoped never to hear Dovanne's voice at close range again. There was history between him and her: history back to their shared childhood days in the orphanage, when the customhouse had been their playground. Once they'd been more than friends, now they were much, much less.

He'd sworn the disaster hadn't been his fault: they'd both been set up. Following her instructions, sent in a signed message, he'd waited alone for hours on a dark, deserted rooftop. But Dovanne, following different instructions bearing *his* signature, had gone to a catacombs storeroom

where she discovered, to her lasting horror and rage, that she wasn't at all alone.

He'd tracked down the ringleader: the one and only time he'd had killed with his bare hands. He'd brought proof to Dovanne in a basket, but she never believed him, never forgave him.

So they learned to steer around each other. Pavék had heard she'd found a patron and hauled herself up a few ranks. Now, he didn't know which was worse: the thought of her hooked up with Rokka or with a dead-heart. Dire curiosity lured his eyes above the barrel rim a second time.

Lord yes, it was Dovanne: bronzed skin, human features, hair cropped short and bleached by the sun, eyes the color of amber and twice as hard. Metallic thread glinted in her left sleeve (a procurer, just like Rokka; the masked templar her patron), the right one was torn off at the shoulder.

Tattooed and coiled serpents spiraled up her exposed arm. Pavék recalled Dovanne's first visit to the skin-dyer: She swore she wasn't afraid of the leering goat, or his sharp quills, and he pretended to believe her while she clutched his hand in a frigid death-grip.

It had taken every coin they both possessed to buy a single, slender, monochrome, serpent to circle her right wrist.

Dovanne's serpents were lush and multi-colored now. She'd done all right for herself. Better than she'd have done if she'd stayed loyal to him. Pavék wanted to be glad for her, but injustice blocked the way.

"We are not alone." A surprisingly commonplace voice came from the mask that spoke to Dovanne, not Rokka. "A friend of yours, perhaps. Or perhaps not. This place holds memories for you?"

She shrugged. The serpents writhed. "Nothing worth holding, great one."

"Then it was a thought—"

Pavék trembled. Necromancers dealt with all manner of death, but only mind-benders plucked thoughts out of the air.

Who was beneath the mask? A necromancer or a mind-bender? Or a master of both arts? An interrogator.

Basic mind-bending defense was instinctive in humans, like closing one's eyes when an object came too close. Pavek thought himself small while he considered the stranger. Measured against Dovanne, the masked templar would stand eye-to-eye with Pavek, but he was much leaner. His hands were obscured by supple learner gloves and lengthened with talons that continued the enameled patterns of the mask. Even so, the fingers seemed long and narrow for human hands. And though Pavek had encountered runty elves, his best guess was half-elf. Before he could recall the names of any half-elf necromancers, Rokka ended the mystery.

"Is there a spy, Lord Elabon?"

Lord was a courtesy title. There were no nobles in Urik's templarate, but Elabon Escrissar was an aristocrat in every other sense. The child, grandchild and great-grandchild of High Templars, for all that he was of a mixed and outcast breed, he had a flair for cruelty that, according to rumor, entertained Urik's ancient, jaded king. Metica wasn't going to be happy when she heard her regulator say that not only was Escrissar involved in the zarneeka trade, he was a mind-bender as well.

"Take a look around," the mask said. "See that we're alone."

Unless Metica already knew. She'd said High Bureau dead-hearts had performed the interrogation. She and I Elabon were both half-elves. Half-elves weren't as clannish as full-blooded elves, but Pavek was ready to wager his last ceramic bit that Escrissar had gone to Metica after the interrogation and she had sold him to save herself.

Rokka searched the corridor where nothing could be hiding; Dovanne came straight at the barrels. Pavek's chances were slim, nil, and none; but he couldn't surrender without a fight. Abandoning the bone torch, he leapt straight up. Both hands grasped an overhead beam, and he swung his heels forward, into Dovanne's face. She collapsed with a growl. Pavek landed within arm's reach of Escrissar, and, with nothing to lose, chopped the black-wrapped neck with the callused edge of his hand. Escrissar went down like a market-place puppet.

The half-giant blocked the stairway up, so Pavek dived past Rokka. The dwarf, reasonably expecting Elabon to end the chase with spellcraft,

flattened against the wall. He shared Rokka's expectation, but had to keep going until a spell dropped him in his tracks. But that didn't happen. Vaulting over a stair-rail, he made his escape into the depths of the catacombs.

He ran around the next corner, careened down another flight of stairs, and ran along a lock-lit corridor. Rokka was a coward at heart, but Dovanne had surely recognized his face. She'd track him to the end of time, with or without her patron's permission. Sound was Pavek's greatest enemy: he sank into each stride to minimize the noise, thinking that if he could get behind Dovanne, he'd have a chance at climbing one of the other stairways to the street level.

And then what? Trust himself to Metica?

Throw himself before King Hamanu's mercy? King Hamanu's *infinitesimal* mercy?

Fear tightened his chest and he stumbled to a halt in the near-darkness. Gasping for air, he swore he wouldn't worry about the future until he reached the street. His ribs relaxed. He spared a heartbeat to listen for Dovanne's footsteps. There was only silence, and he started off at a fast, quiet, walk.

There was method in the catacombs. Corridors crossed at predictable places. Pavek approached each one with caution, working his way across the man-made cavern, far below the room where the zarneeka powder was stored. He allowed himself to believe that he'd gotten behind Dovanne and to hope that her hunger for revenge would lead her back to the places they had explored years ago while he headed for a stairway that hadn't been built until after the Tyrian raid.

Pavek climbed the steps soundlessly on the balls of his feet. The street door was bolted from the inside, which he judged a good omen. With his weight against the wood, he withdrew the bolt from its slot. It squeaked loud enough to wake the dead. He hid in the shadows, counted to fifty, then pushed the door outward. A band of moonlight widened into a rectangle through which he discerned no movement.

The door bumped once against the outer wall, then was still and silent. Pavék counted to fifty again and crossed the threshold.

Arms as thick as a man's thighs dropped around his shoulders before he'd taken his third step. Half-giants were massive and strong, but their bodies were put together the same as any human's. Pavék crashed a boot-heel into his captor's knee and dug his fingertips into sensitive gaps in the half-giant's huge wrists. A pained bellow shattered the night as the brute's muscles spasmed. A second good crack into the half-giant's kneecap might have produced both freedom and a head start down the alley, but a well-thrown punch hit his jaw before he got his foot up.

"Damn you. Damn you to life everlasting," Dovanne hissed as she clouted him again.

Pavék's neck snapped against the half-giant's hard chest. He was stunned: unable to feel anything, but clear-headed enough to wonder what she had concealed in her fist. Then the pain started, and he was grateful for the next weighted blow.

"Thought you'd sneak away again, didn't you?"

Another punch, square in his undefended gut. He lost strength in his legs and would have fallen if the half-giant hadn't held him up. Between blows, Dovanne asked more questions Pavék didn't try to answer. He didn't notice that she'd stopped pounding him until he hit the cobblestones.

"Get up," Dovanne demanded, jabbing her boot into his flank. "*He* wants to talk to you."

Groaning and retching, Pavék hauled himself to his knees. His last-ditch defiance, which had broken his nose so many times, sent disastrous words to his mouth: Elabon Escrissar can wait until I'm dead. But fortunately, his mouth was full of blood and he couldn't say anything. Dovanne yanked her one-time lover to his feet.

"Carry him," she told the half-giant.

That was more indignity than a living man could endure. Pavék spat blood. "I... can... walk."

"Then start walking." Dovanne pointed a slender sap at the open door.

Pavek took one unsteady step after another. He clung to the handrail and pretty much fell down the first flight of stairs. It got easier after that. Dovanne delivered a solid wallop, but she and her sap hadn't broken any bones. He wondered if that was an accident or the lingering scar of affection.

The pain was down to dull aches and he was moving fairly well by the time they got to the zarneeka corridor. The locked door was open. Dovanne gave him a shove between the shoulder blades.

A trestle table had been set up in the center of the storeroom. Rokka stood behind it, busily mixing tiny scoops of zarneeka powder with much larger dollops of plain flour from the half-giant's barrels. He dumped the combination onto scraps of crude paper. Escrissar himself folded the scraps into self-sealing Ral's Breath packets with elegant movements of his taloned fingers.

The mask tilted upward. Their arrival had been noticed. Sharp eyes appraised him coldly from the depths of the mask. He turned away.

There was a halfling in the storeroom as well; he must have been behind the half-giant earlier. A hideous scar in the form of the Escrissar family crest had been burned into the halfling's face. The slave worked alone in a corner, blending zarneeka powder in a bowl with what looked and smelled like golden wine. A similar bowl bubbled on a tripod set over a blue-flamed lamp.

The implication was clear enough, even to a punch-drunk regulator: zarneeka was the necessary ingredient in Ral's breath, but, contrary to Metica—and King Hamanu's assertion—it was also the necessary ingredient in something else. "Pavek, Pavek, Pavek," Escrissar chanted, sucking his teeth and shaking his head between each repetition of Pavek's name. "Whatever are we going to do with you? You've made quite a nuisance of yourself. Too bad you weren't born in Tyr; there they might call you a hero, but here you're just a pathetic little man. A jozhal nipping at the Dragon's heel."

The question was pure rhetoric. Pavek knew what they intended to do with him. He had nothing left to lose or defend. That realization made him

reckless. “Haven’t you heard—the Dragon’s dead-brought down by a pack of jozhals.”

Escrissar’s enameled talons flashed in the lamplight. They were razor-sharp near the tips and opened Pavek’s cheek despite his belated efforts to dodge them. He caught his balance dangerously close to the halfling’s tripod. The scarred slave’s eyes were dead-black and filled with contempt; that expression did not change when the slave looked past Pavek to his master. Pavek let the wall do the hard work of keeping him upright while he sorted through what he saw.

Slaves did not cherish their masters. Hatred, intense and justified, seethed just below the most obsequious smile. Insolence that fell just short of disobedience had to be tolerated, even in Urik, but no slave should have survived the look the halfling gave his master.

Yet, like Rokka with the druid woman, Escrissar didn’t retaliate.

Through the aches and haze, Pavek slowly understood that Escrissar didn’t know the secret of the simmering decoction. He stared at the tripod, envisioning his foot thrust through the tripod’s legs, overturning the crucible, and blatantly daring Escrissar to pluck his thoughts. The mask chuckled.

“Try it, if it will make you feel better before you die, but heroics will buy you nothing. We already have enough Laq to delude all Urik. We have *plans*, Pavek, plans for all Athas now that the Dragon, as you said, has been brought down by a pack of jozhals.”

Laq.

Pavek’s foot stayed where it was. Ral’s Breath took the ache out of a strained muscle or throbbing head. Laq made people crazy, then it killed them. It didn’t add cleanly, but then, he wasn’t an alchemist. That halfling undoubtedly was; and that halfling was making Laq in his crucible. With those hate-filled eyes, the slave was closer to pure evil than Elabon Escrissar could hope to be; closer, even, than the sorcerer-king, Hamanu.

Maybe death now, before Escrissar’s alchemist spread his poison across the Tablelands, would be a blessing.

“King Hamanu will take you apart.” He spat out the words before he thought to censor them.

“Who will tell him? You? Our mighty king will never know—until it’s too late. The rains have come; Athas will belong to us.” Escrissar’s voice was tired; he’d grown bored with the game. “Get rid of him!”

Pavek glanced at the alchemist before Dovanne and Rokka seized his arms. The halfling’s expression had not changed. A tiny thrill of victory beat against Pavek’s ribs: slaves were still slaves. This one, he decided, would slit his master’s throat when the moment was right and take Escrissar completely by surprise when he did.

Then Dovanne shoved him through the door. The half-giant gathered him into a death-hug.

“Sassel!” Dovanne shouted, treating the half-giant as if he were deaf as well as impressionable. “Let go of him.”

So, she wasn’t going to give anyone else the honor of getting rid of him.

“No, I need you here,” Escrissar countermanded. “Sassel knows what do to—don’t you, Sassel?”

The half-giant clamped his great hands on either side of Pavek’s skull and began to squeeze.

“Not here!” the interrogator said quickly. “Take him outside. Take him where no one will notice another corpse.”

\* \* \*

Pavek wasn’t as resigned to death as he thought. His mind was racing as Sassel carried him through the catacombs to the street. The problem with half-giants wasn’t their lack of intelligence, but their single-mindedness. In Sassel’s mind “outside” might be outside the customhouse, or it might be outside the city walls. If it was the latter, there might still be hope for a battered and bleeding regulator.

“There’s no need to get rid of me, Sassel. Take me outside the city walls, and I’ll get rid of myself. You’ll never see me again, and neither will anyone else in Urik.”

“Not going outside the walls. ‘Take him where no one will notice another corpse.’ Corpses get noticed outside the walls. Going to the boneyard. No one will notice another corpse in the boneyard.”

One failure: Sassel combined loyalty with his single-mindedness. Pavek tried another tack. “You’re not a templar, Sassel. Only templars can leave corpses at the boneyard without paying the knacker at the gate.”

Sassel scratched his beard, leaving only one arm wrapped around his captive’s waist. Pavek held still, not wanting to disturb the half-giant while he thought his way through the complication.

“Sassel has money. Sassel pay. Lord Escrissar pay Sassel again, for obeying orders so well.”

“Does Elabon Escrissar always reward Sassel when Sassel obeys his orders?”

“Always. Sassel always obeys his orders, always gets a reward.”

“In gold, Sassel?” Pavek said, fighting to keep the desperation from his voice as Sassel started walking again, carrying him toward the boneyard, which was, in fact, a very good place to lose a corpse, and where the knacker accepted all donations, no questions asked or coins required. “You’ve got to pay the knacker with *gold*, Sassel, if you want him to keep his mouth shut.”

The half-giant stopped short. “Gold? No gold. Sassel has silver, no gold.”

“Then Sassel can’t obey Elabon Escrissar. Escrissar will be very angry. He’ll punish Sassel instead of giving him a reward, Sassel should listen to Pavek. Sassel should put Pavek down and listen to him.”

Half-giants could change their most unswerving loyalty with alarming speed, but Pavek had overplayed his position.

“Pavek the templar should listen to Sassel. Templar talk nice to the knacker. Templar get Sassel into the boneyard for nothing.”

“Pavek the templar will do nothing of the kind.”

“Then Pavek the templar dies right here. Sassel tells a lie to nice Lord Escrissar; Sassel says Pavek’s corpse is in the boneyard. Maybe Lord Escrissar learns the truth tomorrow. Maybe Elabon Escrissar never learns the truth. Sassel gets reward tonight anyway.”

Pavek conceded defeat. He’d never expected deceit worthy of any templar from the mouth of a half-giant. Athas truly was changing. “But you can’t carry me to the boneyard. I can’t ‘talk nice’ to the knacker if I’m tucked under your arm. He won’t listen to me.”

The half-giant changed his grip, setting Pavek gently on his feet. “Sassel didn’t think of that. Pavek walk now.”

Pavek didn’t walk; he ran for the shelter of the nearest dark street. He had a twenty-step lead before Sassel collected his wits.

It wasn’t enough time to hide: Sassel had the same low-light advantage over him that Rokka had, but there was enough time to look for a weapon. The little metal knife wouldn’t damage a half-giant. He hoped for something he could use as a spear or a club, but Urik’s scavengers were thorough. The best he saw was a chunk of glazed masonry large and heavy enough to crack a half-giant’s skull if—a *big* if—he could get close enough to use it effectively. Pavek hid the masonry behind his back.

Half-giants were too big for Urik’s intersections. Sassel had to stop completely before he could enter Pavek’s street.

“What’s Elabon Escrissar going to say when he finds out that you’ve lost me, Sassel?” Pavek retreated while he taunted the half-giant. The street was wide enough that he should be able to side-step and get clean shot at the back of Sassel’s head, when the half-giant lost his temper and charged. “What kind of reward will Escrissar have for a clumsy oaf? Maybe he’ll take Sassel to the boneyard himself. Maybe he’ll find something worse. Poor, stupid Sassel.”

Sassel bellowed and charged. Pavek held his ground until there was no way the half-giant could stop or turn, then he launched himself to one side. Sassel had the templar’s arm for a scant moment. Pavek made a spinning

escape, but he lost his balance for a heartbeat. His elbow led the rest of his body into a collision with coarse stucco wall. White agony exploded behind his eyes, but fortunately for him, he'd only wrecked his *left* arm; and, conquering the pain, he managed to hurl the masonry with his right hand at the base of Sassel's skull with sufficient force and accuracy to drop the half-giant to his knees, then to his face on the cobblestones.

Pavek let his head hang a moment, until his heart beat less furiously. He couldn't move his left arm from the shoulder down. Something was crushed, and he'd need a healer, but other things came first. Wobbling on jelly-filled legs, he staggered to Sassel's side.

Blood flowed through the half-giant's matted hair. He was still alive, but unconscious and wheezing. There'd be more mercy in running his metal-blade knife across Sassel's throat than leaving him to die like an animal, but Pavek couldn't afford mercy. While Sassel lived, he would lie to stay alive. Let the dead-heart slay his servant, if he wanted to read the truth from the last images in his memory.

Grunting with pain and effort, he rolled Sassel onto his back, exposing the leather belt-pouch. Half-giants didn't usually lie; the pouch was hefty and a quick probe with the fingers of his right hand found the reassuring coolness of metal as well as the more neutral texture of ceramic bits. Pavek was looping the pouch thongs around his own belt when he heard the first alarm.

"A templar and a half-giant. Down here! Down Customs Row!"

Half-giants were unmistakable, but so was a templar in his sulphur-yellow robe; and, given the templars' reputation, anyone answering that alarm would take Sassel's side. Pavek tore off his robe. He mopped Sassel's wounds with the cloth, adding the half-giant's blood to his own. Then he looped it over Sassel's fingers.

Eventually, whether Sassel lived or died, the robe would wind up in Escrissar's hands. Maybe it would be enough to convince the interrogator that an inconvenient regulator had bled to lonely, unobserved death.

Footsteps echoed near the customhouse. Cradling his left arm with his right, Pavek escaped into the night.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Pavek's first hours of fugitive exile within Urik were the hardest. Panic clung to his shoulder, whispering dire warnings after every sound, glimpsing the sulphurous yellow of the robe he no longer wore in every half-seen movement. His entire body protested the beating it had taken; his elbow protested loudest. Escrissar's cuts on his cheek seeped fresh blood each time he swallowed the panic; they burned as sweat, hot and cold, mingled with the blood.

He didn't know where to go, wasn't even sure where he was. Streets and quarters that he'd known all his life had gone suddenly strange. Crouched in an airless alley, he beat his head gently against the wall, hoping to loosen something useful from his panic-bound thoughts. He'd been among templars for twenty years, always above Urik's laws, never outside them.

Finally his mind produced a coherent thought—a long—forgotten memory from his early childhood: a horrible day when he'd gotten separated from his mother near the elven market. Tears leaked from his eyes, stinging sharper than all the sweat.

Shame seized Pavek's gut, forcing him to choose between nauseous surrender and a fight against his burgeoning fears. He chose to fight and broke panic's siege. He recognized the alley where he cowered and heard the night sounds for what they were: ordinary and nonthreatening.

He remembered that there was a place in Urik where a fugitive could hide: the squatters' quarter.

\* \* \*

Guthay had slipped below the rooftops by the time Pavek entered a courtyard deep in a ruined quarter. A double-handful of people of indeterminate race huddled together along the walls. They took note of a

stranger's entrance: the whites of their eyes glistened like opals. But Pavék made a brawny silhouette in the starlight, even with one arm folded tight against his flank. No one challenged his right to drink from the pitch-patched cistern in the courtyard's center.

Pavék gulped the cool liquid, ignoring its resinous taste and gritty texture. He dipped the ladle a second time and held the water on his tongue before swallowing it. In all Athas, nothing was truly more precious than water.

He spat the last mouthful into his good hand, then swiped the hand over his face and neck.

Without water a man might die in a single day; with it, he could plan for tomorrow. Spying an empty patch of wall, Pavék claimed it for his own with a heartfelt sigh.

His silent neighbors watched a while longer, until they were satisfied that he was, for this night at least, one of them. Pair by pair, the opalescent eyes closed and the varied sounds of sleep filled the courtyard, while Pavék relived each moment of the previous day, berating himself with if-onlys and might-have-beens. He mourned his lost yellow robe and the heavy wool cloak hanging from a peg above his barracks cot, the stash of coins buried beneath it, and a dozen other things until sleep snared him by surprise.

He awoke with a start in the bright of dawn with the daily harangue ringing in his ears. The orators's voice, augmented by magic, penetrated every quarter of the city, as regular as the huge blood-red sun creeping above the eastern rooftops.

King Hamanu did not claim to be the city's divinity, or any divinity at all, but he did not object when the orator led his subjects through a litany of praise and prayer whose words had not changed in centuries.

Templars, by custom and command, raised their fist in respectful salute for the duration of the harangue. Pavék suppressed the almost instinctive gesture. He clutched his medallion in his fist instead.

"Great and Mighty King Hamanu exhorts his subjects, slave and free alike, to be on watch for a renegade templar, a former regulator of the civil

bureau and known as Pavék. Pavék has committed grave crimes against our beloved city. A reward often gold coins is offered for his capture.”

The just-named renegade templar forced his face to remain calm. Dreading his sudden conspicuousness, he tugged sharply on the medallion thong, but the strand of inix hide was new and personally guaranteed by the dwarven tanner who made it not to break or rot for three full years. And, while the Orator continued the day’s harangue, Pavék let his head drop forward. He studied his neighbors through the fringe of his hair. They all seemed to be going about their morning business, lining up at the cistern, gathering their belongings for a day spent elsewhere begging, stealing, and generally avoiding all templars, renegade or not. No one, to his relief, was staring at the midnight arrival, nor seeming to listen to the orator’s continuing exhortations.

But ten gold coins, however thinned or clipped, represented a year’s wages to the average citizen. Somebody, somewhere in Urik, had surely listened to the harangue and would keep a sharp eye peeled for fortune.

An eye sharpened for what? Pavék asked himself after another moment and began to relax. Barring the medallion, which he shoved into Sassel’s pouch as quickly as he could loop it over his head, there was nothing to identify him as a templar. The orator had given his name and his rank, without mentioning his distinctive appearance or the equally distinctive slashes Escrissar had left on his face. So, it was safe to assume that some version of the previous night’s events had percolated through the templarate, but he judged that it was also safe to assume that it was not the true one.

For the first time, Pavék allowed himself to believe that his ruse had worked, that his blood-soaked robe combined with testimony, delivered alive or through necromancy, had convinced Elabon Escrissar of his death. His body was still young and resilient; his injuries, except for his elbow, were already healing, and the elbow, though painful, wasn’t as badly damaged as he’d feared. His fingers worked, and he could flex the joint, if he didn’t mind wincing through the pain.

He'd have new scars on his face, but he'd never been handsome, and scars were nothing to be ashamed of. A man's life was written in his scars. Last night, his life had changed forever; it was fitting that he'd acquired a new set of scars. He left the courtyard filled with a dead man's confidence.

\* \* \*

It was Todek's Day, his day off—the first of many. He wandered to the open-air market where the most enterprising farmers and day-traders were already setting up their stalls. Todek was justly praised for its vegetables and a particular type of spicy, sun-dried sausage. Pavek boldly squandered two of Sassel's ceramic bits on a steaming breakfast. He gave another four bits to the first man he saw whose clothes looked big enough for him to wear and whose luck looked worse than his own.

The dun-colored garments were stiff with dirt and stank of stale wine. Folk kept their distance, as if he were still a yellow-robed templar.

He found a corner of the market where grandparents watched their youngest grandchildren while able-bodied parents and older grandchildren labored for their daily wage. The codgers eyed him warily; he looked disreputable enough to be a slave-merchant's scrounger. Slavers could sell their merchandise in the squalid plaza assigned to their use, but they and their minions were excluded by law from other parts of the city.

But, like most of King Hamanu's laws, the law against child-snatching could be disregarded for a price, and a mother's warning about the fate of careless children was no idle threat. Pavek ignored the old and young alike—after he used their fears to clear the sturdiest public bench for himself alone.

An idea had come to him while he ate breakfast. As the sun climbed toward sweltering noon, he built that idea into a plan.

Zarneeka had been his downfall; it would be his deliverance as well. Or, rather, the druids would become his deliverance. Druids weren't subversives or revolutionaries like the Veiled Alliance fanatics, but by

everything Pavek knew, they wouldn't approve of Laq. That proud young woman with the smoldering eyes could not be a willing partner with the hate-filled halfling or dead-heart Escrissar. She would listen to the start of his tale and pay willingly to hear the end.

Briefly Pavek entertained an intricate vengeance underwritten with druid gold and culminating with Escrissar's literal unmasking, but the small stubborn voice of his deepest self asked a single question: *Then what?* and the whole idea unraveled. No amount of vengeance or gold could buy his way back into his lowly but familiar regulator's life, and he was fit for no other trade. The orphanage had prepared him well for the templarate, but everything he'd ever learned there was useless now that he was cut off from the sorcerer-king.

He could imagine the reaction of any clerical order if he showed up at their altar-school saying that he only needed to be taught how to pray because he already knew the spell-craft. They'd laugh him clear around the city walls, if they didn't pound him to holy mush for insolence first. Yet his days in the archive were his only other asset. Through patient, methodical curiosity, he'd managed to read and memorize several dozen lengthy arcane scrolls. The archive scholars tried to avoid him and cowered like rabble when he cornered them with his questions, but eventually they had conceded that he understood the theories of elemental providence and the complex geometry of the celestial spheres of influence.

Pavek knew better than most practicing clerics *how* clerical magic worked, but except for wrapping his hand around King Hamanu's medallion and calling out the king's name, no templar understood the nature of faith or prayer.

The midday sun hammered the plaza. Farmers protected their produce beneath drab, bleached awnings. Merchants did the same for their wares with more colorful cloth. Anyone who had an excuse to leave the light-drenched market took it. Grandparents and their charges napped in whatever shade they found, leaving Pavek alone on his bench, his right hand trailing in the lukewarm water of a public fountain.

Through thoughts made thick and slow by the heat, Pavek considered each of the four elements of life: earth, air, fire, and water. Fire was straight-forward. All a man had to do was look up and he could see the epitome of fire, but worship the sun? Pray to it? Dedicate his life to Athas' burning sun? He shook his head. Water was vital and precious, but hold a man's head beneath its surface for any length of time and he was as dead as he'd be with his heart impaled by a steel sword. Air and earth were no different: each was a two-sided coin, life-giving and deadly. In that sense the elements were not unlike the templars' sorcerer-king, but Hamanu was real: a tangible force to be dealt with, not worshipped in the abstract.

Swirled through drowsy, sun-dazzled philosophy and the dull ache of his elbow, a reminder came to Pavek: druids drew their magic not from the pure elements, but from the manifest spirits of Athas itself, its hills and mountains, fields and badlands, oases and deserts. Real places, tangible forces, and—he dared to assume—no more irritable and unpredictable than Urik's mighty king.

No one in his right mind leapt for joy midway through the afternoon's stifling heat. Pavek simply opened his eyes and took a long drink of water, but his spirit celebrated. He'd found the keystone for his future, that one odd-shaped piece which would hold all the others in place. He'd tell the druids what he knew about zameeka and Laq in exchange for protection within their community.

Then, once he was among them, he'd offer to exchange the arcane lore in his memory for initiation into their spell-crafting secrets.

It was a daring plan spun on gossamer assumptions. For all his memorization, Pavek knew very little about the mechanics of druidry. Specifically, he did not know whether it was a path that could be chosen with simple dogged discipline, or if the nameless spirits of Athas had esoteric criteria a renegade regulator could, not hope to match.

And he'd assumed that the druids would be interested in his knowledge of the illicit uses to which their zameeka powder was being put and equally interested in the lore written on the scrolls he'd memorized.

The assumptions were bold, but necessary, and the longer he contemplated druidry—especially the beautiful druid he knew by sight, though not by name—the more vital they seemed to his future.

Sixty days, she'd said to Rokka at the customhouse just a day ago. *Sixty days before we can return with untainted goods.* The threat led Rokka to accept the unsealed amphorae. But did that, in turn, mean the druids would return sooner, or later?

Pavek hoped it meant sooner. Sassel's coins wouldn't last sixty days. He scratched his chin, feeling the stubble of a coarse, black beard. Low-rank templars went clean-shaven; high-rank ones wore their hair as they chose. The daily confrontation with rasp and razor was a ritual Pavek would not miss. In a few days no templar would recognize him, not even Rokka... or Bukke.

If Pavek was smart, he said to himself, he'd hire himself out as a day-laborer at the western gate. He knew the gate drill as well as any templar knew a workman's task, he'd see the druids when they returned, and the pay was five bits a day—three after he paid off the regulators and inspectors—but more than enough to keep a man from starving.

Sassel's coins would last until he was healthy enough to work. The wounds weren't that serious. He flexed his left arm to prove the point to himself, but regretted it. Shooting pain radiated from the joint, which had become bright red and was warm to the touch. He chided himself for sitting too long in the hot sun.

\* \* \*

But Pavek's misery owed nothing to the sun. During the next two weeks, while his other injuries healed, his elbow swelled to twice its normal size. The swollen flesh darkened to angry shades of red and purple, shot with oozing streaks of yellow—like the northern sky when acrid dust blew down from the Smoking Crown volcano. Sometimes his arm below the

elbow was numb, but mostly it seemed that a colony of fire ants had burrowed under his skin.

The joint itself was exquisitely tender. One night Pavék scavenged a scrap of cloth from the market plaza. He bound his arm in a crude sling and continued to hope for the best.

Wage-labor of any sort was out of the question until the injury healed. Pavék grew gaunt from fever and denial; Sassel's purse grew even thinner. Examining the ugly wound by the cool light of morning—after a night in which the throbbing had never subsided enough for him to sleep—he realized the time had come for desperate measures. If he didn't find a cheap healer, he'd be dead of blood poisoning long before he starved.

He began his search with his former colleagues. Templar life had its own predictable dangers. Each bureau maintained a cadre of healers, any one of whom could have purged the poisons from his wound. They were well-paid for their work, but no templar was above a little side profit. Pavék got as far as the inner gate to the administrative quarter where the templarate bureaus maintained their red-and-yellow edifices.

Then he saw a templar wearing an enameled mask and the mostly-black robe of necromancy striding across the paved courtyard. With the distance, Pavék couldn't tell if it was Escrissar or not, but the risk of exposure had suddenly become greater than the pain warranted.

Pavék headed for the daily market where he spent a whole silver piece on a packet of Ral's Breath powder that shouldn't have cost more than two ceramic bits. Mixed with water, it barely numbed his tongue and did nothing at all for the throbbing in his elbow.

With grim irony Pavék recalled the moment in Metica's office when she marveled about complaints. If he hadn't been a fugitive he would have complained himself: there was a city seal on every packet of Ral's Breath vouching for its purity. Urik had survived for over a thousand years because its seal meant as much as its army and king.

When that seal was worthless, someone, somewhere should care.

A naked-sleeved messenger jostled Pavek while he pondered the decline of his city. Out of sheer habit, he started to upbraid the youth, but the pain soared to new heights, and he slumped against the wall instead. The boy grimaced, eyeing Pavek's sling and suppurating wound. Planting himself unsteadily over his feet, Pavek raised his fists and had new, unwelcome insights about the behavior of mortally wounded animals in the gladiatorial arenas: movement was agony, maybe death, but he'd take that messenger with him, if it was the last thing he did.

"That wants healing, unless you're looking to die," the boy said in a matter-of-fact, almost friendly tone. "You'll pay a fortune if one of our healers looks at it, but there's an old dwarf-woman in the northwest corner of the elven market. She's a little crazy-calls on ancient seas for her power—but she's cheap, and reliable." He dug beneath his robe—it was so new the pleats weren't frayed—and produced an unchipped four-bit ceramic piece, which he laid atop Pavek's trembling fist before walking away.

Gasping with astonishment, he nearly dropped the coin. What was happening to his city? Had he sunk so low that a *messenger* was offering him advice and charity? Had he ever, in his messenger days, offered four precious bits to the rabble? He couldn't answer his first question and didn't want to answer his second, but the answer to the last was no, although he'd given as much and more to Dovanne.

The boy messenger disappeared into the maw of the war bureau. He'd have to harden if he wanted to wear that yellow' robe and survive, just as he and Dovanne had hardened. Pavek pushed the coin into Sassel's purse and headed for the elven market. A cheap healer, even a crazy dwarf, sounded as good as he was likely to get.

\* \* \*

Pavek found the healer right where the messenger predicted. She was the oldest dwarf he'd ever seen, sitting cross-legged on a scrap of cloth that might once have been green. A begging bowl half-filled with water and a

few dirty coins balanced on her ankles while she chanted eyes-closed prayers to forgotten oceans.

She looked up when Pavek's shadow blocked the sun. One eye was clouded with a cataract, the other was a radiant blue, as clear as the day she was born. She assessed his elbow with a single glance and named her price: one silver piece.

It was cheap; and it was Sassel's last silver piece. Pavek squatted down to put it in her bowl, inadvertently giving her a close look at his face.

With a hiss and a scowl, she put her hand over the bowl before he could dunk the coin and rose to her feet with commendable agility for one so ancient. She rolled up her mat and led Pavek around a corner.

No word was said until they entered a cramped lean-to behind an active forge. The air shimmered with the heat. Pavek was grateful when she pointed to a tripod stool.

"You are the one they call Pavek the Murderer? The one for whom they're offering ten gold coins?" she demanded, looking down on him with her good eye.

He could imagine how far ten gold coins could go in this benighted quarter of Urik, but he, himself, had gone too far for lies. "I'm no murderer," he answered, not denying his name and morbidly eager to know how she'd recognized him.

"You are a marked man with powerful enemies, Pavek. *Very* powerful enemies. They have visited every healer in the city. Even me. Even poor Josa who worships what's been lost. They told Josa to watch for a man with gouges on his cheek. They promised Josa she would share your fate if she made you whole again."

Pavek had a raw instinct for enemies, a rudimentary mind-bending talent that the old and undoubtedly crazy healer did not arouse. Though the instinct had failed him before, most notably with Dovanne, he trusted it with the dwarven crone. "I have enemies because I saw things done in the templatate that our king would not tolerate. I saw Laq—"

The healer cut Pavék off with a wave of her hand. “Whatever you saw, whatever you think—it is of no concern to Josa. I will not turn you over to your enemies. No healer will. Think what you will of *that*, Pavék the Murderer: Wonder why, and be grateful. But I dare not make you whole.”

“I’m not asking you to treat what Ela—”

Josa silenced him again, this time with a whiff of spellcasting. “It is of no concern to me. It can be of no concern. Your enemy who marked your face marked you well. I cannot heal a mere part of you. He will sense any spellcraft wrought on you within the city walls. He will sense Josa.”

Pavék could name no spell that produced the effect Josa described, but he did not disbelieve her on that account. The archives existed because magic was an evolving art. Escrissar, a mind-bender as well as a master of necromancy, might have spelled something new. Or that halfling alchemist might have coated his master’s fashionable talons with yet another nefarious solution.

“Outside the city walls then? I’ve got to find a healer. Does your order practice outside the walls? Is there someone you can recommend in the villages?”

“There is Josa, and Josa only.” The crone seized Pavék’s right hand and held it palm upright. “You will not leave the city,” she said with deliberate air of prophecy. “You have been marked, like Josa. You will stand alone against your enemies.” She twisted his wrist expertly, propelling the much larger man toward the gap in the wall that served as a door.

“I *need* help,” Pavék protested, petulant and desperate.

“Buy Ral’s Breath; your enemies have not visited the apothecaries. Make a paste of it and smear it over the wound.”

The mere thought made Pavék cringe. “Ral’s Breath is useless,” he sputtered, but her spellcraft still hung in the air and though he thought of Laq, the word did not find its way to his lips.

“Take your coin to Nekkinrod the apothecary. His stock is old; it will serve. Ask the smith, he’ll point the way. Tell him Josa is wise.”

Josa released Pavek's hand, and he stumbled back into the light. The smith, another dwarf, looked daggers at him when he asked the way to Nekkinrod's, but his tongue loosened when he added Josa's name and wisdom. Pavek followed a centuries-old dirt path through the core of the elven market, where no templar went alone, until he came face-to-face with an apothecaries's paste-board. Nekkinrod was at least as old as Josa and wreathed in the fumes of cheap rice wine. He took Pavek's silver piece in exchange for a Ral's Bream packet that was dingy with dust. In the day's second unexpected burst of charity, Nekkinrod offered water from his own cistern for the paste and, figuring that he was as safe in the middle of the elven market as he'd be anywhere else in the city, Pavek accepted.

He tasted a few grains of the bright yellow powder. They were breathtakingly bitter and numbed his tongue to its root. Slathering the paste over his elbow was every bit as painful as he'd feared, but the joint deadened almost at once.

"It works! It's going to be all right," he sighed and allowed himself a glimmer of hope.

"One won't be enough. Not for that. Three more," the drunken elf insisted, holding up four fingers.

Pavek's heart sank. With the messenger's charity and every ceramic chip left in Sassel's purse, he couldn't buy another packet. "Credit? I'll pay you when I can work again."

The elf doubled with laughter, reeling and staggering through his stock in the process. A roof board collapsed, revealing rust-colored sky. Between Josa and Nekkinrod, Pavek had lost the entire afternoon in the elven market. The palace bell would ring soon, signalling the moment when the gates closed. He hadn't eaten yet and the breadth of Urik lay between him and the squatters' quarter where his moonlit silhouette was no longer so intimidating.

"If I come back tomorrow with silver, do you *have* four packets of Ral's Breath? *Old* packets like the one I just bought."

Nekkinrod caught his breath with a rheumy cough. "Four times four, and all as old as you," he said before succumbing to another gale of

laughter.

Pavek didn't wait for a more coherent answer. He bought a loaf of bread before leaving the elven market. It was slaves' bread, more sand than flour, and crunched loudly as he chewed; no wonder slaves were toothless by the time they were thirty—if they lived that long.

If *he* lived that long.

His elbow tingled as the astringent Ral's Breath did its work, leaching the poisons from his blood. It was a start, but not a healing, and the poultice would only make the infection worse if he didn't scrounge up four silver pieces. Scrounge.

Pavek shook his head ruefully. There was no way he'd *scrounge* four silver pieces; he'd have to steal them—one-armed and seedy with fever. His chances were nil and none, but he blended into the foot traffic milling toward the gates, hoping to target a prosperous, careless farmer returning home after a successful market day.

But mekillots would fly before prosperity and carelessness were linked on the streets of Urik. He reached the southern gate as poor as he'd been in the market.

At least the regulators and inspectors on duty at the gate didn't recognize him.

There was a red-lettered sign on the side of gatehouse. His name was written in hand-high letters along with his general description and the promise of twenty, not ten, gold pieces for the templar who handed him over to the High Bureau. Escrissar roust know he was still alive and must want him in the worst way. And watching the inspectors harass every tall, black-haired human trying to leave the city, he realized Josa was right: he wasn't going to leave Urik.

That was almost a relief. Aside from a few routine messenger assignments to the market villages, he'd never been out of the city and had never experienced an urge to travel. Whenever he thought of the druids he hoped to join, Pavek imagined them dwelling in the customhouse. He simply *couldn't* imagine living in a place without walls.

But the close scrutiny meant Pavék couldn't linger around the gates until they shut. He worked his way through the artisan quarters instead.

\* \* \*

Prudent citizens lived soberly above their shops and provided nothing for a desperate opportunist, but not every citizen was prudent. Pavék took note of several raucous taverns whose patrons would eventually have to depart for home, with, one hoped, a few coins left in their purses.

But only a few. The men and women who walked the streets after midnight with four silver pieces in their purses dwelt in the better quarters of the city, where they were protected by bodyguards and magic. Pavék resigned himself to committing a dozen crimes before sunrise, before the benefits of his one dose of real Ral's Breath wore off.

He made himself scarce in the borderland between the squatters' quarter and the customhouse, not far from Joat's Place. The streets there were deserted after dark and most criminals were deterred from their trade by Joat's clientele. Making himself comfortable in a dark, cluttered alley, Pavék had ample time between sunset and midnight to contemplate hunger, pain, and the mysteries of fate. He figured he'd be dead by sunrise, waiting for death in a civil bureau lockup, or saving his life in the elven market. All three seemed equally probable in his mind when he heard the start of a ruckus in the squatters' quarter.

Squatters were lucky when they had a ceramic bit tucked away at sunset, but when he heard someone snarl: "Maybe you can steal it, but you can't keep it," his curiosity was roused. Testing his elbow and finding the joint could be moved without unbearable pain, he followed the sounds.

Gumay was rising, and one of the thugs had a torch—one of maybe six or seven adolescents who'd flushed a younger, smaller boy. The scene was easy to decipher. The boy didn't have a chance; they'd pound him senseless sooner or later and take his treasure, but the thugs were still fools.

*Maybe you can steal it, but you can't keep it*, had different meanings to different thieves. The thugs had let their prey retreat into a corner where they couldn't press their advantage in size and number. They were taking too long, making too much noise, drawing attention to themselves.

He picked up two loose cobblestones, one for his good right hand and a second which he tucked into his sling. The gang hadn't left a lookout at their back another example of foolishness. They were too loud to hear his approach or hear one of their number go down without a groan when he clonked a vulnerable spot behind an ear with the cobblestone.

But the second fool-thug had a thicker skull. He bellowed, and Pavek found himself the center of attention. The six human youths, four male and two female, were tough, but scrawny—no match for a man who trained two full days a week with his fellow templars and specially selected gladiators.

No match for the templar Pavek had been, but a challenge for the injured fugitive he'd become.

They took quick note of his weakness. Pavek spent more time warding off blows aimed at his elbow than delivering his own punches. When he connected with his fist or booted feet, a young thug went down and stayed down. He'd have them all stretched out in the alley eventually, but not soon enough: the damned fool thugs had *all* turned their backs on the boy-thief, who, being less a fool than they, was making an escape.

Pavek nearly cursed aloud when he saw the boy's silhouette scoot by: that was his life the boy was escaping with, but some sense of fair play he'd never suspected in himself, quieted his tongue. One of the women had produced a nasty looking fang-knife. She feinted at Pavek's elbow from the periphery of the brawl. When he didn't parry the feint, she thought she had the better of him and committed herself to a deep thrust. Pavek beat her knife aside, then backhanded her across the mouth with a single, smooth left-handed clout. Blood sprayed over his hand. He hoped the blood was hers because his elbow felt as if it had exploded, and the howl of pain echoing through the night was his own.

Maybe the thugs thought he was summoning an otherworldly power, or maybe they realized the boy had fled and they were wasting time in a futile

fight. Whichever, they headed out of the alley, hauling their wounded behind them. Heartbeats later there were more shouts, more running footsteps and a flash of torchlit sulphur yellow at the head of the alley.

Hamanu's infinitesimal mercy—his howl had drawn the attention of templars. But, seeing his rags and sling, they judged him not worth saving and turned back. He'd finally gotten lucky—just when the pain in his arm was so intense he would have welcomed death.

\* \* \*

Pavek wasn't suited for a life of crime—at least not the free-lance variety. He wasn't going to rob twelve poor sods this night, or any other. He wasn't going to the elven market tomorrow to buy Ral's Breath. He wasn't going to parley his archive spellcraft for druidry.

He was going to die on the dirty streets of Urik.

*O Great and Mighty King Hamanu—let it be soon.*

One object still weighted Sassel's purse: his templar medallion. With that inscribed lump of glazed clay clutched in his good hand, Pavek could invoke the sorcerer-king's magic. A spell of simple healing was granted to every templar when he first received his robe and medallion. Pavek knew the forms of more potent healcraft from his archive researches. The ancient monarch was a miser with his magic, as he was with everything else in his purview. King Hamanu would sense an unfamiliar, unpermitted invocation and trace it relentlessly to its unfortunate source.

The future no longer mattered. Pavek fumbled with the purse thong. The medallion was warm in his hand.

"You're the one."

He thought the voice was King Hamanu's and dropped the medallion. It bounced to the feet of the young thief who'd inexplicably returned to the scene of his good and bad fortune.

The boy picked it up and studied it in the moonlight.

“You’re the one,” he repeated with more confidence. “You came back. You took her body away.”

“The one what? What body?” Pavék lunged for the medallion and missed.

“You’re the one they’re looking for. The one they say is worth twenty pieces of gold. Is it because of her? Because of my mother—or because of my father?”

The boy was familiar. At first Pavék tried to match his features with the young messenger who’d given him charity at the inner gate, then he looked deeper in his memory and found the boy whose misbegotten parents had started his slide from grace. He was suddenly weak in the knees.

“Neither and both, boy, not that it matters. Give my medallion back and make yourself scarce. This place will swarm with yellow when I use it.”

The boy twined the thong around his wrist instead. “What did you do with her body?”

Pavék spotted the remains of an old bone stool that looked as if it might support his weight. He staggered toward it and sat down before he fell. “I took her to the bureau, boy. I wanted to know why she died.”

“Laq.” The boy followed him to the fire-charred chair, dangling the medallion on its thong.

“Yes,” Pavék nodded. “Laq. I know now. I wish I didn’t.”

“What happened to her body when the dead-hearts were through?”

“I don’t know.” Pavék reached for the medallion and froze in midmovement. His agonized, fevered mind was playing tricks on him. He wasn’t looking at the boy from a few weeks ago—he was looking at himself when they told him Sian was dead. Escorting his mother’s corpse to the bone-yard had been the most important thing in his life, then. His hand fell. “The boneyard, I imagine. They don’t keep corpses; that’s a lie we tell to keep the rabble in line.” Where Elabon Escrissar was concerned, Pavék truly didn’t know, but there was no need to burden the boy with Elabon Escrissar. “I heard she talked about you—Zerve, isn’t it?”

“Zvain. It’s a southern name. He wasn’t my real father.”

“You were smarter when you ran away last night. Now be smart again. Give me back my medallion and light out of here.” Pavek held out his hand.

Zvain considered the hand and the medallion. “What’s your name, great one?”

“Not ‘great one.’ Pavek, just plain Pavek or Right-Hand Pavek or Soon-to-be-Greasy-Cinders Pavek. Come on, boy.”

“You want to die?”

“I’m going to die; my arm’s full of pus and poison. I want to choose the time and place: right here, right now.”

“You don’t have to die, Just-Plain Pavek. I can save you. We’ll be even.”

“You can save me! You’re no great priest in disguise, Zvain.” A stab of agony turned Pavek’s humor sharp and biting. “You’re just a boy. Save yourself; give me the medallion and get lost.”

“I know... I *know people* who will help you, if I ask them to.”

Pavek’s eyes narrowed. The boy had said twenty gold pieces, not ten. Maybe someone had taught him to read. Maybe it was just a mistake. “Who do you know?”

“Can’t tell. Can’t even take you to them directly. But they will help, I swear it. I’ll take you home. You’ll be safe there. I’ve got a bed and food. It’s cool during the day.”

And maybe he was dead already—what the boy offered sounded too good to be believe, but Pavek pushed himself to his feet and followed the boy into the night.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The air was cool on Pavék's face and tinged with scents he could not identify. His left arm, which had been agonizing the last time thought had left an impression in his memory, was quiet. He could wiggle his fingers without pain, feel their tips with his thumb, but when he tried to lift or bend his arm he met unyielding resistance: His elbow, it seemed, had been sealed in stone.

His eyes were still closed. He opened them, hoping to resolve the mystery of his arm, but the place where he found himself was dark as a tomb. Indeed, he wondered if it was a tomb.

Pavék's sense of who he was and how he came to be was hazy. There was an odd, metallic taste in his mouth; his ears made their own ringing music. He guessed he'd been asleep for a long time, and an unnatural sleep at that. He remembered a boy, a long walk through darkness, and a sickening collapse. The boy—Pavék could not pluck his name out of the darkness—said they were going to a safe place, but he'd collapsed before they'd arrived. He remembered the boy sobbing and the sound of his feet when he ran away.

Had the boy been death come to collect his spirit?

Had death abandoned him to the dark, demi-life of the tomb?

Some sects said death was a beautiful woman; others said it was the Dragon. Pavék couldn't remember any sects that personified death as a wiry lad with dark eyes and tousled hair. But then, he couldn't remember much more about himself than his name.

He lay still and, after a moment, heard the steady beat of his pulse.

Tomb or no, if he had a pulse, he was alive and should try to remain that way. He thought about food and water, the prerequisites of remaining alive, and found that, despite a heartfelt conviction he'd gone days without eating or drinking, he was neither hungry nor thirsty.

So—he was not dead, not hungry nor thirsty, and not in pain, despite the stone around his left arm. He decided he could move his other limbs and, at the same time, discovered that he was stretched out on a thick, feather mattress that was softer than any bed he'd ever slept on before. He tried to coordinate his limbs: to use their strength to free his left arm from its prison. The fingers of his right hand scraped along a packed dirt wall when words that were not his own echoed between his ears.

*Drink now?*

The words had not been spoken aloud: he was as certain of that as he was of anything. His first thought was that he was not alone in the dark, dirt-walled chamber. His second, more cautious, thought was simply that he was being observed. The cool air swirling faintly over his face was no longer pleasant or comforting. He thought of ghosts, spirits and otherworldly haunting. An involuntary shudder racked the length of his body. A stab of remembered pain lanced the imprisoned elbow.

*Not to worry. Everything is fine. Drink now? Eat? Rest?*

The slender fingers of a smallish hand brushed gently against his forearm. The boy? Possibly, though the boy had seemed fully human, with eyes no better adapted to darkness than his own.

A halfling?

“Who are you?” he asked in an expectedly hoarse whisper. His throat was tight; it *had* been a while since he'd spoken. “What are you? Where are you? Where am I? What's happening to me?”

*So many questions!* The silent voice twinkled with bemusement. *There was sickness throughout your blood and body. You were brought here to heal; you are healing. You are safe. Is that not enough, Pavek? What more do you need to know?*

His head sank into the feather mattress. There was much he wanted to learn, but nothing more that he truly needed to know. He relaxed with a guilty sigh. “Water,” he asked, then added, digging deep into memories of childhood before the orphanage, “if you please.”

More merriment in his mind, like bubbles in the rare sparkling wines of Nibenay: *I please.*

The spout of a delicate glass pitcher pressed against his lips. A slight, but strong, hand raised his head. He had a momentary vision of his nurse: a halfling woman with an ancient child's face and dark, diamond-shaped tattoos framing her eyes. The vision faded as the cool, sweet water trickled down his throat, but not the memory. He'd know her, if he ever saw her again, especially if she smiled.

*Rest, Pavek. Sleep quietly while your body heals.*

He resisted because he was a man and did not like to be compelled, however gently or wisely. Then his eyes closed and he obeyed.

\* \* \*

There were other awakenings, some when Pavek's left arm seethed with inner fire. His back would arch tight at those times, and he'd remember the words every drill-field instructor barked at the end of a training session: Heal quick or heal forever. Pavek had left his wounds malingering for nearly two weeks—had no choice, really. A competent healer could seal a cut with a finger's touch, but Pavek couldn't purge poison or regenerate muscle overnight. His body informed his mind that this healing wasn't finished and sometimes it told him that he must open his mouth to scream.

Strangely, even with his own anguished sounds filling his ears, Pavek was unafraid. After that first awakening, when his thoughts had swirled with questions and doubts, he did not worry about anything. Hands would slip beneath his neck to raise his head for a sip of water or a thick broth that tasted pleasantly of honey and meat. Only the halfling woman with the diamond tattoos spoke directly into his mind; the others ministered in total silence.

There was never light, never a clear memory of the healcraft that must be taking place while he slept. And mostly he did sleep, without dreams,

without time. He was grateful, but it wasn't natural; nothing about this underground chamber was natural. The water tasted pristine, but the broth could hide a dozen concoctions beneath its robust flavor, including one that left him in calm and blissful acceptance of very strange circumstances.

\* \* \*

Pavek awoke again and found the chamber awash in the shadowy light of a small oil-lamp. The drowse that had insulated him from worry was gone, as was the stone weight around his elbow. He needed no help to raise his head or sit—though he regretted the latter. He'd been on his back too long. Blood drained from his head. The chamber spun in spirals, dimmed to a charcoal fog.

"Easy there, Pavek my friend. Be a bit more considerate of my hard work."

A man's voice, probably human and speaking with a familiar Urik accent, drifted through the fog. A man's hand, big-knuckled and callused, clapped between his shoulders, pushing his head forward and down until his forehead banged against his knee. Blood reversed its flow, and he got an odd-angled look at the cleric who'd healed him: unruly hair atop a round, soft-featured face, ropes of mottled clay beads clattering against a barrel chest, and a robe the exact color of the chamber walls.

Pavek shrugged free of the helping hand. He sat up with no further ill effects, looking straight into guileless brown eyes. "Are we friends? I don't know you. You know my name; what else do you know about me?" His neck was naked; the medallion was missing, where or when he couldn't begin to guess. The rest of him was naked, too, although a linen sheet allowed the pretext of decency.

"Everything mat's worth knowing." The cleric's grin was as merry as any Pavek had seen on a sober man. "Oelus," he added, offering his hand, which Pavek regarded with undisguised suspicion.

“You are a healer, a cleric bound to some temple or sanctuary? You aren’t... hidden?”

“Veiled?” Oelus spoke the word with raised eyebrows; his hand remained outstretched. “No more than you. But, if you’re asking if the Alliance knows where you are, the answer is yes.”

“I remember a boy. Was there a boy?”

“Very definitely—and scared out of his wits. He’d got you halfway to safety, then had to leave you where you fell. Worst place to be, my friend, halfway to safety. Very exposed and a risk to all concerned. You can be sure our veiled friends moved quick to get you here, no questions asked ’til much later.”

Oelus’s words percolated through Pavek’s skull. By implication, the boy had, indeed, been leading him to an Alliance bolt-hole, which wouldn’t have been safety—not for a templar. The templarate hunted Veiled mages as vermin, and the vermin returned the favor. No quarter was asked or given from either side. He wouldn’t have drawn two breaths inside an Alliance bolt-hole; the boy, himself, would have needed luck to get out alive.

Making a mistake like that, the boy couldn’t be an initiate. Pavek had no idea where he’d collapsed, but the hand of fortune had tripped him just in time: to protect their bolt-hole, the magicians must have spirited him into the hands of an amenable sanctuary and the competent hands of an earth-worshipping cleric, Oelus.

“And the boy? Zvain, Zvain—that’s his name, isn’t it? I can remember his face. What of him? Did he suffer for what he did? For what he meant to do?”

The cleric’s eyes narrowed—thinking, analyzing—then the merry grin returned. “He’s worried, angry—all the things boys get when they think they’re old enough to be included in adult affairs, but aren’t. Nothing worse.”

“Free to come and go as he wills?”

Another calculating glance. “Very definitely. The path that lies before Zvain must be freely chosen. There is no other way.”

There was more here than Pavek's freshly awakened mind could decipher. He raked his hair and felt matted tangles and grease. Cleanliness was far from mandatory in the templarate, but Pavek had savored the tile-lined baths beneath the barracks. He was appalled that he'd grown so rank and wondered how the cleric could stand so close without gagging. Perhaps it was part of a healer's training as it was, to a certain extent, part of a templar's.

A templar's lifelong training.

His hand began to tremble. Without warning, an abyss opened within his mind, separating what he was from what he'd been. Perhaps he hadn't been so lucky, after all. He covered his right hand with his left and noticed the fresh crimson scar winding around his elbow like one of Dovanne's serpents. Oelus had done a hero's work: the left arm was notably leaner than his right, but pain-free and fully flexible. Strength would return quickly enough, a few days on the practice fields—

The abyss widened. Pavek shook his head helplessly.

"Something wrong?" Oelus asked, taking Pavek's left hand between his own. He poked, prodded, twisted, and flexed until his patient yelped. "Pain? Expect a little stiffness. Your muscles had rotted, Pavek. Would've been easier to lop it off right here—" He pressed the edge of his palm into the muscle below Pavek's shoulder. "But I figured to let you make the decision for yourself: fight for your arm and keep it; languish and lose it."

Pavek considered the prospect of one-armed life and cringed. "I fought," he assured himself. "What happens now, healer? I know what the Veil would have done, what about you? Your peers? Superiors?"

"You're my problem, Pavek. Mine alone," Oelus stated firmly. "You were my patient; now you're my problem."

"And your solution to that problem? Do I walk out of here or have I been buried forever?"

"Neither. Oh, you *could* walk out of here, and you might even find your way back to the sun before you starved, but your name, Regulator Pavek, is still written in red on the gatehouse walls. You should be honored: The

reward is up to forty gold pieces and, from what I hear, many have died trying to collect it.”

He sucked his teeth, but was otherwise speechless.

“It’s no great secret that the templarate consumes itself. No secret and no loss. But to be so noisy about it!” Oelus chuckled and shook his head. “I wondered myself: How did a mere third-rank, civil bureau regulator gain so many enemies? And why were his enemies having such trouble reeling him in? You roused curiosity underground, Pavek, as surely as you roused your enemies above it. The weather-eye was out for you, but you slipped through every net until the boy stumbled on you, by chance. Or so I heard.”

“Zvain,” Pavek repeated the boy’s name with a sigh and experimented with a fist. “If you know everything about me, you know his name, and you know it wasn’t by chance.”

“A slight exaggeration,” Oelus admitted. “You raved a bit those first few days, and I know how to read a body’s tale. You’re basically too healthy for a slave or peasant, too much muscle for a nobleman—not enough for a gladiator. The wrong calluses and scars for any artisan. And you’ve got all your teeth. Add that up and it comes out yellow, even though you weren’t wearing yellow and you had a putrid wound. I read the walls and listen to the morning harangues. I figured the boy was coincidence.”

“A coincidence who just happened to know a short path toward the Veil?”

Oelus gave an open-handed smile. “To be sure, that’s what he was doing—but did he know it? I don’t think so, and neither do you. The boy’s his own mystery: not my problem or yours, agreed? If the Veil’s got a weather-eye on him, at his oh-so-innocent, oh-so-corruptible age, I don’t want to know any more about him, do you? Better he remain a coincidence, don’t you think? Or maybe you have an interest in him yourself?”

Time was—time when there was a medallion around his neck—that he would have slain the cleric on the spot for the insult. That time was past. “Someone’s taught him to read the walls.”

“No one from the Veil,” Oelus said, weighing his clay beads between his fingers. “If *they* know your boy can read, they’ll keep him at a double arm’s length until he’s old enough to keep a vow with his life. Too much risk otherwise.”

Pavek bristled. “He’s not my boy. He’s an orphan. Lost his mother and father the same night not long ago. If the Veil’s interested in Zvain, they’re risking his life leaving him alone on the streets. If they wouldn’t take him in, they should’ve killed him outright. This way, they’ve got no more mercy than Hamanu’s dead-heart necromancers.”

“None whatsoever,” Oelus agreed. “No room for sentiment behind the Veil. They feed on their own, too. Best be glad that boy’s not your problem.” Oelus uncannily echoed the thoughts swirling in Pavek’s head. “Or mine. You’re enough of a problem for me. What should *I* do with a 40 spelled gold-piece regulator?”

Pavek’s wits had steadied. He was not the disoriented man he’d been when he’d awakened, and Oelus, though round-faced and smiling, was not a jovial fool. The beads and the color of his robe proclaimed his devotion to the element of earth; otherwise, there was nothing about him to connect him with any particular sect or sanctuary, or his position within it. But there was a good chance Oelus stood near the top of his hierarchy rather than at its bottom: A renegade regulator with a 40-gold-piece reward, was, however, a very real problem.

For which Pavek had an inspired solution.

“Initiate me into your order. Let me become one of you. I know—”

Oelus silenced him with a look of genuine astonishment. “Templars have no talent. Mekillots will fly before the elemental spirits hear a templar’s prayer, or heed it. It’s beyond question.”

He hadn’t expected the path to true mastery to be an easy climb, but neither had he expected it to be summarily blocked from the start. Pavek responded to the disappointment as he’d responded to it throughout his life: with a jut-jawed scowl and a brazen disregard for consequences.

“Be damned! Templars aren’t questioned for talent. For all you know, *friend*, I might have more than you, but you’re too dead-heart cowardly to find out.”

The cleric had the decency to look embarrassed. “You might well have had, Pavek. Have had—that’s the important part. I think you were cut from a decent length of cloth, but you were sewn up as a templar all the same. The king’s magic corrupts all who use it, Pavek. That’s the simple truth. Find that orphan boy, instead, Pavek; stand him in your shade. Your former friends might still be looking for you, but they’ll never recognize you sheltering a youngster. You’ve got a strong back and a clever mind—you’ll make way enough for two in Urik.”

“And if I refuse?” he flexed muscles that, though less impressive than a dwarf-human half-breed mul’s, were more than sufficient to smash a cleric’s round skull against the nearest wall. “Do you have another solution to your problem? What if I refuse to leave your sanctuary?”

Oelus matched his tone without physical display. “You don’t remember arriving here; you won’t remember leaving. I’m not often wrong about a man; I don’t want to be wrong about you. Listen to your heart. The poor, parched earth of Athas knows how you’ve managed to keep it alive where you’ve been. Listen to it...”

An amber flame danced hypnotically on the wick of the oil lamp. Pavek stared and cursed inwardly.

Suppose Oelus was right; suppose his templar’s life had placed all spellcraft beyond his reach? Could he still barter his knowledge of the zarneeka misappropriation to the druids in exchange for... what?

For an itinerant’s life?

But compare that with life scrounging in the city. What good was a clever mind or a strong back when he’d always be looking over his shoulder for a flash of yellow?

And why not take a wiry, orphan boy with him? Was he a dead-heart, too—no different from Elabon Escrissar or the fanatics behind the Veil?

“Damn your eyes, priest,” Pavek said aloud, his own way of conceding the wisdom of Oelus’s suggestions.

The radiant smile reappeared on the cleric’s face. He pumped Pavek’s hand and clapped him on the back. “You *are* a good man. I predict good fortune for you, and for the boy. A woman will come later with your supper. Eat heartily, without fear. Tomorrow you’ll greet the sun as a new man with a new life.”

Pavek shook off the camaraderie. “Naked as the day I was born and just as poor. Spare me, priest. I grew up in a templar orphanage; I’ve heard it all before. Bring me your potions in a plain cup—”

“All that you came with will be returned,” Oelus insisted, his smile undimmed. “Saving the shirt, which was not fit for rags. We’ll give you another—and a few bits for your purse, enough to see you and the boy started.”

“I had a knife, a gray steel knife—”

“With human hair wound beneath the hilt leather? Yes, it’s kept and safe.”

A fist Pavek did not remember making relaxed. Air filled his lungs in a sigh. The hair was Sian’s, cut from her corpse in the boneyard, more cherished than any single memory of their few years together, before the orphanage. He held a hand against his naked neck.

“My medallion?” like her hair, it belonged to a lost time. Twenty years of time now lost as completely as Sian.

Oelus frowned. “You have no need of it—”

“Nor have you,” he interjected sharply and saw deceit on the cleric’s face. “Was that the Veil’s price? Will they use my medallion to attack the king?” Strangely, the notion offended him. Mages who left children to fend for themselves on the streets of Urik were, to borrow Oelus’s expression, cut from the same cloth as King Hamanu, but without the king’s experience and, yes, wisdom in ruling the city.

“No, it is with your other possessions. But, surely, you do not wish to be tempted to wield its power in your new life?”

“You know Hamanu’s magic corrupts, but you don’t know how it works, do you? Believe me, priest, there’s less temptation to me than there is to you.”

“But if you’re discovered with it—?”

“Then my ‘new life’ is over. It’s *mine*, cleric, will you return it to me?”

“That medallion will bring you grief, Pavek.”

“Do you read the stars or scry the future? Don’t harry me with vague threats, priest. Tell me what you know, or tell me that you’ll return my possessions, as you promised.”

The cleric exhibited a moment of doubt, then, visibly reluctant, nodded. “I would have you remember me as a man of my word, whatever the danger that medallion brings you.”

Light appeared in the passageway beyond the chamber and, moments later, a shadow and a woman bearing a steaming loaf of bread on a tray.

“Your supper,” Oelus explained. “May the earth lie gentle beneath your feet all the days of your life, Pavek, and give you rest at the end of it.” He touched Pavek’s forehead with the fingers of his right hand. “It is not every man who gets to start over. Take care of yourself and that boy.”

Despite his protests that he wanted his draught in a plain, bitter cup, the aromas seeping through the bread set his mouth watering and blunted his appreciation of the cleric’s blessing. Matching Oelus’s bow with a curt nod of his head, he’d retrieved the tray before the sounds of Oelus’s sandals faded.

The door remained open—a challenge he ignored.

Securing the linen at his waist, he lifted the upper portion of the crusted bread from the hollowed loaf beneath it. The stew was thick with roots and tubers and other things that grew in the earth, but tasty nonetheless. He consumed it, the upper crust, and was tearing the bowl itself into bite-sized pieces when lassitude struck, and he fell asleep where he sat.

Pavek awoke with the warmth of sunlight on his face and the inimitable sounds of the Urik streets in his ears. He remembered Oelus, the stew, and the moment when his eyelids became too heavy to hold open. Before he

opened his eyes, his hand moved to his neck. The inix leather thong was in its familiar place.

“A man of his word,” he whispered.

“Are you awake, Pavek? They said you’d wake up when the sun came ’round.”

He recognized the young, reedy voice. Oelus was definitely a man of his word—not the first Pavek had met, but with the others, the epithet was not entirely a compliment. He stretched himself upright, knocking his bands against a low ceiling in the process. Zvain’s bolt-hole was another underground chamber. Sunlight filtered in through a yellowed slab of isinglass set between the lashed-together bones shoring up the roof and walls. Pavek blinked as oblong darkness landed in the center of the isinglass, and felt foolish as his hearing made sense of the background noises: The translucent isinglass replaced one of Urik’s countless paving stones. Zvain’s chamber had been carved beneath a street or market plaza.

The ex-templar shook his head and succumbed to a rueful grin. Not once during all the years he’d descended into the customhouse galleries or to his own bunk in the barracks had he suspected that ordinary citizens—and noncitizens—had also solved Urik’s joint problems of oppressive heat and limited building materials by digging into the rock-hard ground.

“Why’re you laughing?”

“Where are we?”

“Near the head of Gold Street, near the Yaramuke fountain.”

Pavek calculated the location: Zvain lived under one of the merchant quarters of the city. It seemed incongruous for a moment, then less so. Templars left the safety of the merchant quarters to the merchants.

“How’d you find this place, Zvain?” Pavek ducked under a bone rafter, heading for the door. How many—?”

The boy stood firm on the threshold. Neither Zvain nor the flimsy door of cloth and sticks behind him represented a meaningful barrier, but he halted all the same.

“You *are* a templar. You’ve got no manners.”

Away from the isinglass the chamber was in permanent twilight. Zvain had the stature and slenderness of a boy midway through childhood, but his eyes—large, dark, and without passion—were older.

“Do I owe you anything? Last I remember, you said we’d be even if you saved my life. Did you save my life, boy, or did someone else?” Pavek countered, taking Zvain’s measure with typically harsh templar tones and accusations. He could justly claim that he needed to know the boy’s mettle and knew no other way to assess it, but he regretted his words when Zvain’s expression melted into silent grief. “I guess you’re right, boy: I’ve got no manners.”

His hands separated in a palms-up gesture of frustration that the boy saw as an invitation. Zvain threw himself against his chest, locking arms around his waist, trembling with tears. Feeling frustrated and helpless, he wrapped an arm around Zvain’s thin shoulders and rested the other hand atop his head. While pent-up tears dampened his shirt, he swayed on his hips, surveying the chamber that had become his new home.

The bed where he’d awakened was wide enough for a husband and wife. A corner filled with rags and blankets marked the nest where Zvain slept. A single straight-backed chair and a tiny table completed the furnishings, except for shelves hammered into the dirt walls on which a meager assortment of domestic utensils and—yes—a tattered alphabet scroll were neatly arranged. The merchants upstairs would burn the lot for cooking fuel, but he knew better. He knew how the rabble lived. Life with Sian had been a succession of crowded rooms and reeking alleys, each one a little worse than the last. Zvain had lost much more when he became an orphan than he’d ever had.

He patted the tangled hair and squeezed the boy tight. There was a single, strangled wail as seeping tears became a torrent, but the virtue of silence was a lesson Zvain had apparently learned in his heart. The boy shuddered from head to toes without making a sound.

“We’ll manage,” Pavek whispered, wishing he believed his own words.

Pavek closed his eyes and found the benign, round face of the cleric, Oelus, smiling in the darkness of his mind’s eye. Well and good for Oelus:

Oelus was tucked away in his sanctuary. Oelus's robe was dry and his meals were served by women who knew how to cook. Oelus had nothing to worry about.

Pavek banished the cleric with a hard-edged thought, but there was something else hovering dimly in his memory. He called it closer and it became a woman's face—not the battered, broken face of Sian or Zvain's mother, but beautiful, proud, and, at first, unrecognized. He could understand why he'd see Oelus within his mind's eye; the cleric's smile could easily have been real spellcraft, and not the product of his beleaguered imagination. But the zarneeka druid? Why had he called her out of his memory?

"You'll stay?" Zvain asked, not daring to lift his head.

The druid's face remained in Pavek's vision after he opened his eyes, daring him and judging him as she'd dared and judged him in the gateway.

"I'll stay," he agreed. "We'll manage."

He expected the image to smile. Oelus's image would be bursting with an ear-to-ear grin, but the druid of his imagination did not change expression. Pavek's anger surged at her, at himself. He barely knew how he was going to *manage*, much less manage for himself and a boy. Raising children was women's work—not that Sian had mastered the art. Then inspiration came to him on a cool breeze.

Women's work indeed, and a woman who faced down templars without breaking a sweat should be willing to do it. Perhaps he had been corrupted, had no hope of learning a purer sort of spellcraft—but here was Zvain, orphaned by Laq, which had been corrupted from the druids' precious zarneeka powder. She couldn't turn her back on an orphan, wouldn't turn her back on a man that orphan trusted, even if he were a dung-skulled baazrag.

"We'll manage," Pavek repeated more confidently. "I have apian—"

Zvain shifted within Pavek's hands. His face tilted upward, the dark eyes glinted with unshed tears. "I'll help, Pavek," he promised. "I'll learn whatever you teach me, I swear it. I'm ready now. Look—" The boy

squirmed free, rummaged through his blankets, coming up with a vicious object slightly longer than his forearm. Bent obliquely in the middle, it had a lump of dark stone lashed to one end and an obsidian crescent at the other. “I stole it from a gladiator. I’m ready, Pavek. We’ll hunt Laq-sellers together.”

The boy mimed a move that in the arena might have split an opponent from gullet to gut.

“Damn King Hamanu and all the templars.” Zvain slashed again. “Damn the Veil who let him kill her to save their own precious hides! You and me, Pavek, we’ll do what needs to be done!”

Zvain’s eyes were still bright with tears, but otherwise the fragile, grief-stricken orphan had vanished.

“We will, won’t we?” Zvain paused with the weapon cocked above his shoulder.

Words failed.

“*Won’t we?*”

“We’ll try, Zvain,” Pavek answered softly. His attention was fixed on the jagged, sharp curve of the obsidian crescent. The druid’s face had returned to the depths of his memory, and where was Oelus when he was needed? What would the pious cleric say to a reckless, vengeful child?

“Try isn’t good enough,” Zvain protested, his lips beginning to tremble as grief regained the upper hand on vengeance. “It isn’t right. It isn’t fair. She’s dead forever. Somebody’s *got* to care. Somebody’s *got* to do something.” His hand was trembling along with his lips and voice. He might drop the weapon, or he might launch himself at Pavek’s throat.

“We will, Zvain. We’ll do something, I promise you that.” It wasn’t a lie. Pavek believed the druids would refuse to trade at the customhouse once they knew about Rokka, Escrissar, and the halfling. Without zarneeka, Laq would have to disappear. “Give that here. You can’t kill all of them, Zvain—why even start?” Pavek held out his hand and held in his breath.

Zvain’s eyes narrowed beneath thoughtful brows. His fingers rippled along the bone shaft, making the weapon wobble in rhythm with his own

doubts. Then the decision was reached. He lowered his arm; the weapon slipped from his grasp. Pavék snatched it with one hand and the boy with the other. He lifted Zvain into a snug embrace while he stowed the weapon on the highest shelf.

“You listen to me, you hear?” He gave the clinging weight a gentle shake. “You do what I tell you to do. No more stealing from gladiators. No more talk about hunting men, no matter what they sell. This is Urik—King Hamanu’s city. Break his laws and you die.”

“Templars break his laws all the time. They don’t die. You broke his laws. You didn’t die.”

Pavék scratched his itchy scalp with his free hand. He’d forgotten what little he knew about children the day he donned the yellow robe and ceased to be one himself. “Don’t argue with me, Zvain,” he said wearily, letting the boy slide back to the floor. “Just do what I tell you, or I’ll leave. You understand that?”

The boy went wide-eyed and passionless again. Nodding solemnly, he hid his hands beneath his shirt. “I understand that, Pavék. I’ll do what you tell me. I promise.”

\* \* \*

Zvain tried, but he wasn’t the half-grown boy Pavék had taken him for. Though slight and slender, he was on the cusp of adulthood. One moment he’d be clinging to Pavék’s arm as they walked familiar streets. The next, he’d spin away, all snarls and hisses, determined to have his own way, whatever the cost. He was too clever by half and suspicious by nature. Pavék still judged the Veil harshly for leaving him to fend for himself—if that’s what they’d done—but before they’d eaten breakfast and made their way to the western gate, he could understand their reasoning.

He didn’t dare tell Zvain what he had in mind, why he wanted to scout the gate or why, when he learned that it was the 160th day of the Descending Sun, he approached the inspector.

“The boy and me want to work, great one,” he said, meeting Bukke’s eyes, putting Oelus’s assumptions to their hardest test.

Bukke seized Pavek’s arm, giving it a brutal wrench. Pavek dropped to his knees. “Big, strong man like you—why haven’t I seen you before? Why don’t I know your name? Don’t you know what happens to runaways, scum?”

“No runaway, great one—just down on my luck, a bit. Heard you could always get work with a strong back loading and unloading at the gates. That’s all, great one.” Pavek hung his head ’til his beard brushed his chest and let his fear show as well.

His medallion was stowed in the bolt-hole beside the weapon, nothing else could give away, unless Bukke made an association between the crude, weathered drawing on the wall and the man kneeling in the dust at his feet. Actually, the gate inspectors wouldn’t care whether a man was free, slave, or runaway, so long as he could stand the pace, which on the appropriate market day could be brutal. Bukke gave his arm a final twist, then released it.

“What’s your name, scum?”

“Oelus, great one.” It was a common enough name in Urik.

“Well, Oelus, you’re too late for today, but come back at dawn, and we’ll put you to work.”

He rose slowly to his feet, draping his hands over Zvain’s shoulders, grateful that the boy had kept quiet. The disparity in their sizes and coloring was great.

“My boy, great one? He can run water, great one. I’m a bit down on my luck, great one.”

Bukke laughed coarsely. “More than a bit down, if he’s the best you’ve got, scum. What’s your name, little scum?”

“Inas, great one. Can I run water, great one?” Zvain asked with a quavering voice. “Please—O great one?”

He pinched the narrow shoulders hard; no good could come from overdoing things. Bukke laughed at them both but entered their names on

the roll for the morning, Inas at one-quarter wages. Zvain remained docile and obedient until they were out of sight and earshot of the gate, then he kicked Pavek's ankle and would have punched him in the groin again—if he hadn't been expecting the move.

## CHAPTER SIX

“What’s it going to be today, Pavek? Some more groveling and toe-kissing at the west gate—or are we going to do something *worthwhile*?”

Pavек had been dreaming about sleep when Zvain’s whine awakened him. He lay still, giving nothing away. Veterans of the templarate orphanage learned to lie still with their eyes closed until other senses had measured the moment.

“Sun’s already up, Pavек. If you don’t hurry, you won’t be the first belly-crawling, toe-kissing, yellow-loving groveler on the west gate sand. *Yes, great one; no, great one; kick me again, great one...* I thought you were a *man*, Pavек. Some man. Some forty-gold-piece fugitive. You can’t do anything ’cept lick dust from yellow-scum feet—”

With his eyes closed and his muscles lax from dreaming, Pavек swung futilely at his early morning nemesis. “Quiet, boy!” he snarled, knowing it would serve no purpose.

“That yellow-scum Bukke-o wouldn’t believe me if I told him who you *truly* were.”

Pavек didn’t need his eyes to see Zvain’s face shrivel into a sour pout.

If the boy were right about that one last point... If neither Bukke nor any other templar could recognize him through his laborer’s sweat and grime... If he could have convinced himself of that, then he could have confided in his young companion.

But Pavек couldn’t, and so he told the boy nothing about his plans and endured the abuse that only youth and innocence could generate.

Zvain wasn’t the most irritating man-child to raise his breaking voice within Urik’s walls. Pavек remembered himself too well for that sweeping judgement. The mul taskmaster at the orphanage had taught him the errors of orneriness with daily demonstrations. His jaw still ached when the wind blew low from the northeast. An urge to teach Zvain the same lesson the same way stiffened the muscles of his right arm.

This time there'd be no missing. He would clamp his hand around that scrawny neck and pound that noisy head into the wall until it had a damn good reason to whine. But he wasn't cut from the same cloth as the old taskmaster. In his mind's eye he saw Zvain's anger, his faith, and his tears.

He couldn't savor breaking a boy's skull or his spirit—

“Where's your heart, Pavek? Your courage? Your pride?”

—the way the mul had savored breaking his.

“All you think about is your damned wages. By the time you get done crossing every yellow palm at the gate, you're no better off than you were when you started. I ate better when I was *stealing!*”

That had to be an exaggeration or outright lie. The boy was always hungry. He could eat a grown man's portion any time and come back for more an hour later. There was no way to fill both their bellies at the end of each day—even if they'd had Zvain's quarter-wages. Which they didn't.

Zvain had tried his whining on Bukke the first day and was lucky to escape with his life. Now, instead of running water the boy idled between the inspection sand and the gate: just out of reach, barely out of trouble. Another reason—as if Pavek needed one—to keep Zvain ignorant of the true reasons he strained his back every day, eating insults from templars, merchants, and farmers alike.

Today would be different. Today was Modekan's Day. The sixth such day since Metica had summoned him to her chamber. The druid woman had told Rokka it would be sixty days before she and her fellow itinerants could haul more zarneeka to the dry. If the wheels of fate rolled round, today was the day she and her companions would return and tomorrow would truly be the first day of an ex-templar's new life.

But if the wheels of fate's chariot thumped square...?

Pavek's musing stopped short as he was drenched with foul liquid from the slops jar.

“Got to get up, slave-man.”

He swung across his body, without thinking, but not blindly. The back of his fist caught Zvain soundly between ear and chin, lifting him off his

feet. The boy thudded against the far wall before Pavék got his eyes focused. He'd slumped to the floor before the older man got untangled from the soggy linen.

Cursing loudly and shedding water everywhere, Pavék stomped to his feet. He was cursing himself for losing control, but Zvain didn't guess that. Those dark eyes were wide with animal terror. Insolence transformed into liquid sobs as blood poured from the boy's nose and lip.

"Stop sniveling," he commanded.

A small part of him wanted to get down on his knees with comfort and apologies; but the larger part looked in horror and disgust on another weeping victim. Survivors didn't cry no matter how bad it hurt or how great the injustice. They didn't dare. Once an orphan cried, the others swarmed without mercy. Sometimes victims died quick, sometimes their suffering went on for weeks until they simply disappeared. He'd survived because of Sian; she'd taught him not to cry before she left him in the orphanage.

Not trusting himself to move closer, he heaved the damp linen into Zvain's lap.

"Next time, don't start what you can't finish."

"Won't be a next time," Zvain replied after mopping his face. "I swear it."

Fear had left the boy's eyes, what remained was older and calculating. Pavék watched as measurements were made and targets chosen. Like as not, he could ward off any six attacks the boy launched against him, but the seventh...?

An unwilling shiver ran down Pavék's back. Whoever did or did not come through the gates for Modekan's market, he wasn't coming back to this bolt-hole tonight.

Damn Oelus! Let the Veil reel their orphan in if they wanted to. He'd had done enough.

With deliberate casualness, he approached the high shelf where he'd stowed the boy's stolen weapon and his templar medallion. His hand closed around the medallion. The weapon was missing.

“Why’re you taking that?” Zvain asked, his voice gone charming again, and full of childish curiosity—as if nothing had happened. He came close and wove his fingers through the inix thong while it hung from Pavek’s fist. “You said it was too risky to take it to the gate.”

An older man couldn’t change his mood so quickly. He shed the boy and stepped around him, shoving the medallion to the bottom of his pouch before securing it to his belt.

“Why, Pavek, why?”

“Same reason you moved that arena stick: not sure I trust the people I’m living with.”

“I didn’t mean anything, Pavek. I know you got your reasons for what you do. You don’t have to go. I don’t want you to go.”

There was a long, hot day between now and nightfall. Maybe he’d feel differently when his back ached and the weak left arm throbbed with every heartbeat. Maybe. If the druid and her zarneeka didn’t show up.

He grunted, neither yea nor nay. “Then act like it. Stay out of trouble. Stay out of my way. Do that for a day—” His voice faded. Templars learned to tell easy lies, but lies came harder now, without that yellow robe for armor. “You ready?”

Zvain sniffed loudly and wiped a last trickle of blood onto his forearm. “I’m ready.”

\* \* \*

The boy was quiet as they passed through the awakening city. He stuck close, never wandering off, begging, or whining—all of which had become part of their morning ritual. Bothered by an emotion he couldn’t name, Pavek stopped at a fruit-seller’s stall where he exchanged a ceramic bit for a breakfast of cabra melons. A small cadre of citizen-vendors made a good living buying fruits, vegetables, and other perishables cheaply at the end of one market day for sale the next morning at considerably higher prices to people like him who needed to eat before the gates opened.

Zvain tore the rind with feral delight but winced when bright red juice stung his busted lip. He handed the melon back, and Pavek found his nameless ache had grown worse rather than better.

“Don’t wander off,” he whispered when the gate loomed before them. “Stay where I can see you.”

The boy nodded solemnly. Pavek dug into his belt pouch again, drawing out the last two ceramic bits and dribbling them into the boy’s hand.

“You believe in anything, Zvain?”

Immortal King Hamanu was Urik’s tutelary deity. His titles and powers were part of the daily harangue; his name was an integral part of countless blessings... and curses. But belief was another matter entirely. To ask the question was an invasion of privacy; to answer it honestly, a declaration of trust.

“Sometimes. You?”

“The round wheel of fate—after a good day, not before. We need a good day, Zvain.”

“I’ll pray for you, Pavek.” Zvain folded his fingers around the sharp-edged, irregularly shaped coins. “I know a place.”

“Better you stay here. Remember what I said: no wandering off.”

A shout went up from the line of merchants and farmers already waiting at the gatehouse: the templars—due at sunrise but always at least an hour late—could be seen approaching. Pavek hurried toward the inspection stand—pausing once to see if Zvain had settled in. The boy had found a patch of shade behind a heap of rock and bone left behind after the most recent refurbishing and repainting of King Hamanu’s portraits on the walls. They exchanged a fleeting wave.

Modekan sent artisans as well as farmers to the weekly market. Pavek worked up a rapid sweat emptying four cart-loads of red-glazed bricks destined for some noble’s town-house. An inspector—not Bukke—judged several dozen: defective, levied a substantial fine, then called Pavek aside

once the carts had been reloaded and the unhappy artisan sent along his way.

“You know your way through the templar quarter, rabble?”

“Not well, great one,” Pavek lied. So much for prayer or the round wheels of fate.

The inspector offered an uncut ceramic coin if Pavek would haul the pirated bricks to a High Templar’s residence. “She’s building a fountain,” he confided unnecessarily. “With day labor.”

“I’m a poor man, great one, ill-clothed and dirty—not fit to cross such a threshold.”

The inspector doubled his offer and Pavek, knowing that no man in his right mind would refuse the opportunity, conceded defeat gracefully by falling to his knees. He listened attentively as the inspector described a precise path through the deliberately mazelike quarter.

It could have been worse: at least he wasn’t headed for House Escrissar. With the promise of two coins awaiting on his return, no one was surprised that he loaded the handcart quickly and set off at a trot. He tried to catch Zvain’s eye, but the boy was napping.

And gone altogether when he returned. He asked as many questions as he dared among his fellow laborers, but no one had seen a slight, dark-haired boy leave his patch of shade, even when Pavek offered three bits of his new-found wealth for the information. The bribe drew unwanted attention from laborers and templars alike.

Mindful that everyone was already whispering about him and that his true name with its associated 40-gold-piece reward had not yet faded from the gatehouse walls, he was reluctant to ask anyone if an old dwarf, a testy half-elf, and an uncommonly beautiful human woman had dragged a cart of amphorae past the templars’ greedy eyes.

Not long after he returned to the gate, the ground shuddered and, moments later, a plume of ash-colored cloud began to rise far to the north of the city: Smoking Crown was living up to its name. Those folk near the gate who venerated the elements of air or fire made the appropriate obeisance.

Everyone else asked luck or fortune to keep the wind blowing from the south—to no avail. The southern wind faded almost at once and the cloud tower curled toward Urik long before it peaked. By noon the air was foul with sulphur and Pavek's jaw was aching the way it did whenever the wind came across the Crown.

There'd been no sign of Zvain or the druid. He told himself there was nothing to worry about. It had been midafternoon when the zarneeka arrived last time. Zvain had" wandered off yesterday and the day before; he'd been back well before sunset both times.

"Nothing to worry about."

"What's that?" another laborer asked. He was a lanky veteran with a stubbly gray beard and a close-fitting leather cap to protect his bald scalp. His lips curled over toothless gums and though he kept pace with the younger men, Pavek swiftly judged him the least dangerous of this day's companions.

"Looking for someone," he admitted.

"Woman?"

Pavek nodded. A man could always blame a woman for his edginess. He offered an honest description of the druid, omitting her two companions.

"Not inspected, that's for sure. Not passed along, either, I think. I'd've remembered her. Traveling by herself or with a group?" When Pavek hesitated, the veteran drew his own conclusions. "Found someone better, eh? and left you with that boy on the hill?"

"Close enough." It was the simplest explanation and far more believable than the truth.

"I'll keep my eyes open." The veteran gave Pavek a good-natured clap on the shoulder. "You're young yet, and that boy's near full-grown. There's plenty of time left. No need to be worrying 'bout a woman who won't come home, son."

Pavek muttered vague appreciation while trying to remember if anyone had ever called him 'son' before and—whether he liked the sound, considering its source.

Then Bukke shouted “Oelus—get your butt over here,” and the conversation was over.

\* \* \*

The acrid breeze that made Pavék’s jaw ache soured everyone’s disposition. As soon as he was in range, Bukke chastised him for dawdling and struck him across the shoulder with a leather-wrapped prod. A prod with expensive iron beneath its leather, judging by the bruising weight and sting, suitable for the slave-pits but illegal here at the gate where free men worked for pittance wages.

With a painful gulp, regulator Pavék resisted giving inspector Bukke a taste of his own weapon.

“Unload it, *now*, scum,” Bukke snarled, striking Pavék a second time before pointing the prod at a hitherto unsuspecting farmer dragging a cart loaded with firewood.

“As you will, great one,” Pavék replied and with will alone he wrestled the entire cartload onto the sand.

A smart, sane man would have groveled loudly. When he’d been a templar, he’d been smart enough, sane enough to grovel; now that he was an outcast wage-laborer he spread the kindling in silence. His arm was numb, the rest of him throbbed with pain and rage, but he wouldn’t give a yellow-scum templar like Bukke the satisfaction of seeing any emotion on his face.

The Crown’s eruption-belch ended with another ground-swell. Its towering plume of ash tapered off, transforming itself into a creeping stain across the sky. In a matter of hours it might swallow the sun and bring its acrid shadow to the inspection sand. Templars and freemen alike bent their fingers into luck-signs, hoping the sun would continue to beat down on their sweating heads.

Not so long ago, every person in this corner of the Tablelands had known what to expect when the Crown belched: three days of misery with

stale air, foul winds, and a layer of soot that turned Urik a dingy, charcoal gray, then thirty days of conscript scrubbing until Hamanu's city shone yellow in the sun again.

Urik still got three days' misery and thirty days' scrubbing, but twice since the Dragon's death Smoking Crown's eruptions had heralded fierce water-storms in between.

Some blamed the storms on Tithian, the lost tyrant of Tyr. Others blamed them on forces far more ancient and evil. Either way, Urik, built to endure heat and blinding sunlight, took a beating from the gritty, wind-driven rain. And the scrubbing lasted forty days or more. So the people prayed, as they had never prayed before. But not even King Hamanu could say when or whether an eruption would breed a storm.

Uncertainty, in a city where change was forbidden, was the heaviest burden of all.

Bukke cast judgment on the kindling without giving the sticks a second glance. "Put it all back in his damned cart." He swiped Pavek's shoulder again, but his aim was off: his fingers were still twisted into the luck-sign of fire.

Pavek prayed silently to the wheel. With that cloud wandering the sky and the memory of the previous storms etched deeply into his mind, he was having second thoughts about leaving the walled city for the empty unknown. It was no surprise, then, that moments after he started thinking he could survive another sixty days—or forever—the leather-capped veteran was tugging at his sleeve.

"I'll spell you here," he offered. "Get yourself a swallow or two of water, and ease your eyes down the line. I think I spotted your woman."

"Is she—is she alone?"

The veteran shook his head sadly. "Two men. Can't see why she'd throw you over for either of them: the dwarf's as old as the hills, and the half-elf's a scrawny lad. Maybe it's best to leave things where they lie—?"

"No—" This time the hesitation was real. "I've got to speak with her."

“Your decision, son, but have a care. Everyone’s gone skittish on account of that cloud, even an old man like me,”

Pavek got the hint and unknotted his pouch. He dug out three bits then, after glancing at the pile of broken stone and seeing the empty shade around it, he dug out three more. “Tell the boy—”

Tell the boy what? he asked himself, raking his hair and staring at the cloud.

“Tell him he should have listened, he should have stayed close. Tell him I’m sorry, that’s all.”

Spinning on his heel, he caught sight of the half-elf’s coppery hair, then—already ignoring the veteran—he started toward them, moving with slow purpose, so if he drew the attention of the templars each would think another had given him an order.

The trio stiffened as he approached. The half-elf moved his hands nervously over the smooth wood of his staff and the dwarf lowering the cart traces, flexing the stone-solid forearms typical of his kind.

The druid—he realized, with some dismay, that he had no notion of her name—stood at arm’s length between her companions.

“Woman,” he said when he was close enough for whispering. “Hire me to haul your cart through the city. Your zarneeka’s being turned to poison, and you need my help.”

Her eyes widened. She seemed about to say something, then Pavek felt myriad fiery needles pierce through his skin, and his mind was engulfed in blazing light. His world became timeless until, with a nauseating thump, his heart began beating again. By the time his sputtering mind had reconstructed itself, Bukke had joined them.

“What’s going on here, scum?” the inspector demanded, flourishing his prod for effect.

Bukke glowered at each of them in turn, lingering longest on Pavek’s bearded face, giving him enough time to wonder if, with all of them together in the same place, the younger templar would remember what had happened exactly sixty days earlier.

“No dishonesty, great one,” the druid replied without a hint of deceit or indecision. “I was hoping to hire a man to haul our cart through the city.

Bukke scowled skeptically: even an old, leather-faced dwarf was stronger than a day-laboring human. The druid deflected Bukke’s suspicion with lowered eyes and a fleeting smile.

“We were delayed, great one,” she explained. “Poor Yohan exhausted himself getting this far—”

Poor Yohan had gotten the message. He was rubbing his muscles now, not flexing them. His shoulders sagged, and he’d developed a remarkably weary demeanor—all of which confirmed Pavek’s original supposition: the woman was the one he had to deal with.

“Ah—you’re all worthless scum anyway,” Bukke decreed. He swung the prod to emphasize his judgment, striking Pavek’s still-aching shoulder. “But he’s more worthless than you. Choose another and begone.”

A silent scream swelled in Pavek’s throat. He’d placed all his hopes and faith in this moment, only to see them disappear.

“I see none better, great one,” the druid said, scanning the other laborers with disdain worthy of a templar taskmaster. Then she focused her attention firmly on Bukke. “This scum will suffice.”

“As you wish, Lady,” Bukke conceded, his voice slower and softer than it usually was. “Will you be looking for an overnight inn?”

“No, great one. I’ll be done with him by sundown.”

“Your name, Lady—for the records?”

“Akashia, great one. These are my servants. Their names are not important. I won’t be trading in any market; my goods are already promised to their new owner, taxes paid and receipts recorded. There is no need for you to remember us at all, great one. Just send us on our way, great one.”

“Yes.” Bukke spoke like a man in the midst of a pleasant dream. “Yes. Go on your way.”

Pavek risked a tiny sigh of relief as he took the dwarf’s place between the traces. She had believed him—surely that burst of pain had been the product of druid spellcraft as had Bukke’s uncharacteristically mild and

cooperative manner. She would not have risked a second display of spellcraft if she had not been satisfied with the first. Unlike the mages of the Veil, druids were not outlawed in Urik, but any magic that the king did not personally control was risky in Urik.

He glanced at the debris. The shade was empty, and he was still thinking about Zvain when the dwarf's jagged fingernails pressed between the nerves and bones of his wrist.

"Whatever happens," Yohan hissed—grim hazel eyes meeting and breaking Pavek's determined stare—"your life belongs to me."

With his arm already weak from Bukke's prod, Pavek didn't doubt the old dwarf could finish him off, but if, by some remote chance, he survived Yohan, the half-elf's scowl promised another battle. He turned weary eyes to the dwarf.

"We're all meat if we don't get moving," he said, not loudly enough for Bukke to overhear.

Yohan released his wrist, and though Pavek would have preferred a moment to shake blood back down to his fingertips, he hooked numbed fingers around the traces instead.

"Are you ready?" the druid asked, a hint of maternal impatience in her voice, for all that she looked several years younger than Pavek himself.

With Bukke still blinking in the dappled light, Pavek and his new companions walked past the gatehouse and the inspection sand. There were countless reasons to keep his head down as he pulled the light and well-balanced cart up the shallow slope to the open west gate of Urik. He rejected them all and stole glances in every direction, hoping to catch sight of Zvain. They were almost at the man-high feet of mighty King Hamanu when Pavek saw a dark, lithe shadow in the tail of his right eye. He turned his head toward it.

"Something following you, city-scum?" the half-elf snarled—the first words he had spoken and full of a familiar adolescent whine.

"No, nothing."

The stones and scrub where the shadow had appeared were empty now. Maybe there'd be another chance before sundown. Maybe—but no sane man would waste spit on those dice. The cart rolled from the packed dirt of the outside to the smooth, patterned cobblestones of Urik's streets. They reached the first plaza. He veered left, toward the wide, well-traveled avenue that led directly to the customhouse. The dwarf continued straight ahead toward the tangled stalls and alleys where weavers, dyers, and cloth merchants plied their trade. They collided with each other and the cart.

"Where you think you're going?" the dwarf demanded. "The customhouse."

Yohan retreated a pace, giving him another measuring sweep with his eyes. The customhouse had *not* been mentioned since he'd joined them.

"Is there a problem?" the druid asked.

"He headed for the customhouse."

She laid a reassuring hand on Yohan's shoulder before turning to Pavek. He lowered the cart traces and, belatedly, worked on the cramps in his shoulder and arm.

"Follow Yohan, and don't cause trouble. We must attend other matters first."

He soon discovered the substance of those 'other matters.' Once he'd dragged the cart deep into a thicket of uncut cloth and bright-dyed skeins of wool and linen—where they were screened off from prying eyes and a man's shouts for help would be absorbed by the cloth or lost in the general din of bargaining—he was pummeled by the dwarf until he lay face-up on the cobblestones, with the tapered, metal-wrapped ferrule of the half-elf's staff resting in the hollow of his throat.

"Search him," the druid commanded, and the dwarf did so—efficiently.

"Well now, what have we here? An interesting bit of crockery for a wage-scum to have tucked beneath his belt..."

Yohan held up the glazed medallion.

"A templar! Yellow-robed blood-sucker," the copper-haired youth sneered, and the pressure on Pavek's throat increased.

“Not *a* templar, Ruari,” the druid corrected, taking the medallion from Yohan’s hand. “But *the* templar who gave us so much trouble last time we were here.” She dangled the yellow ceramic above Pavek’s face. “I am correct in that, am I not? You are *that* templar...? What happened to your bright yellow robe, templar-scum?”

Pavek was not fool enough to deny the accusation. “The zarneeka—that yellow powder you bring to the customhouse—it gets made into a poison called Laq—”

The half-elf leaned on his staff, and Pavek groaned.

“Ease off, Ru. Let him finish.”

Between coughs and gasps, Pavek had a heartbeat to wonder if he hadn’t made the biggest mistake in his soon-to-be-ended life. “Ral’s Breath was sold freely and cheaply everywhere in the city. Folk who couldn’t afford a healer’s touch thought it eased their pain. Now your zarneeka gets simmered into a poison that rots a man’s mind and turns him into a raving beast before it kills him. I thought you would want to know. I thought a druid—”

Pressure returned with a vicious twist—

“Ruari!”

—And eased again.

“I thought a druid would *care*.”

“He’s a templar. A liar and a spy. Let’s kill him and leave him here. The quicker the better.”

The fire-hardened staff wavered in Ruari’s hands, but his aim was true enough to kill a helpless man in a few, pain-filled moments. The druid steadied the staff with her own firm grip. “Why should I believe anything you say, bloodsucker?”

“Because you kenned me already, and you know I speak the truth. You need my help, woman... if you *care*.”

“My name is Akashia,” she said, pushing the staff aside. “And I do care. What about you? Since when does a templar *care* about anything that does not line his purse with gold or power?”

It wasn't an easy question to answer, especially with that half-elf ready to send him to oblivion for every hesitation or ill-chosen word, but he tried. He described the Laq-crazed man storming into Joat's Den, and how that had led him to a woman's broke-neck corpse, an administrator's chamber, the inspection sands and, finally deep in the customhouse itself.

He did not mention names—not Rokka, Dovanne, nor Elabon Escrissar—because he judged the key to surviving this lopsided conversation was a miserly hand on the truth (unless Akashia had kenned every thought and memory in his mind, which by all that he knew of spellcraft or mind-bending was not possible in such a short time). Nor did he mention Zvain or the round-faced, smiling cleric Oelus.

Akashia's face, viewed from his current angle, was as hard and passionless as any templar's. He was fat gone from the pan to the fire, and it was just as well that the boy had vanished.

"I've been outcast these last six weeks, with a forty-gold-piece price on my head, waiting for you to return—"

"You are the Pavek written on the wall?" the druid asked, warming slightly and revealing that she, too, possessed forbidden literacy.

He nodded. The movement drew the staff to his throat again.

"A templar—excuse me—a *renegade* templar with a conscience. Let him up, Ruari."

He got slowly to his feet, dusting his shabby shirt and tugging it smooth beneath his belt. "Pavek—" he extended his hand. "Just-Plain Pavek. I don't like what this Laq poison does before it kills. I don't claim a conscience but —" A length of rust-colored cloth rippled, though the air was still inside the cloth quarter. He stood on his toes, trying to see over the cloth. Once again he caught the impression of a dark, lithe, and fleeting shadow; nothing more—until he felt Ruari staring at him with renewed suspicion.

"But what, Just—Plain Pavek?" Akashia urged, seeming not to notice that anything was amiss. "What do you have, if it's not a conscience?"

"The information you'll need if you want to stop—" Pavek caught himself with Escrissar's name on his tongue. "If you want to see that your

zarneeka powder isn't turned into Laq."

"And what to you want in exchange for this information, Pavek—since you don't have a conscience to tell you right from wrong?"

She'd insulted him. Pavek was sure of that from her arched eyebrows, but for the life of him, he didn't know how. She'd changed the rules, and he felt shame as he explained himself. "First off, I want safe passage from Urik to your bolt-hole. You must have one. Then we'll trade for my information."

"He can't be serious!" Ruari exclaimed, then, when the woman did not immediately support him: "Akashia—you can't be serious. He's a templar! Once a yellow-robed bloodsucker, always a yellow-robed blood-sucker. He'll betray us all—if he hasn't betrayed us already. He's been looking all around, like a scum-slime traitor who's led us into an ambush. Shifty-eyed templar-scum."

The youth thwacked Pavek's shin with his staff, drawing blood and, very nearly, retaliation.

"Are you looking for something, someone?" Akashia asked.

His initial judgment had not changed: he wasn't sure he trusted them any more than they trusted him, and he definitely didn't want Zvain involved. Fortunately, there was another acceptable answer: "I've got forty gold coins resting on my head, woman! Of course, I'm jumping at shadows and looking over my shoulders."

"That's a lot of gold," Yohan the dwarf mused aloud.

"Take a very rich man not to be tempted."

"Pyreen protect us," Ruari swore an oath Pavek had never heard before. "Let's just turn him in."

"No," Akashia decided, and her decisions were clearly the ones that mattered. "Yohan—?"

She turned to the dwarf, her fingers fluttering in what, for her, seemed unusual femininity. Pavek had half an instant for suspicion before Yohan's fist blasted into his gut, and the half elf's staff struck hard at the base of his skull. After that there was darkness, and after the darkness, oblivion.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Pavek awoke empty-headed and floating in air. An instant later he landed hard on splintery wood. His mind crystallized: the last thing he'd remembered was being hit over the head in the dyers' plaza. Now he was knotted up inside the handcart as it rolled over rough pavement.

Whoever had spit-tied him was a master of the craft. His wrists and ankles were bound tightly together some immeasurable distance behind his back and anchored from there to the cart itself. His limbs were stretched, strained, and throbbing. His hands and feet were numb. In the midst of his discomfort, he spared a moment to wonder who, besides another templar, would bind a man tight enough to cripple him.

Another jolt brought him back to immediate concerns. He couldn't stifle a moan, but no one noticed. There were other voices, near and far. The words were lost in the wheels' clattering. He couldn't see anything, either. A piece of coarse cloth had been bound over his eyes. Straw had been thrown over him as well; the sharp stalks pricked through his clothes to his skin, which, he realized, was chilled.

The sun had set. The gates of Urik were closed. The druids must have consigned their zarneeka to the city—the cart wasn't large enough for both him and the amphorae—after which they'd hauled him, bound and unconscious, out; of the only home he'd ever known.

Pain-fogged as he was, Pavek didn't know whether to be relieved or terrified: he was out of the city where his life was worth forty gold pieces and into the care of druids who didn't care if they crippled him. At least they'd protected his eyes; a man could go blind through his eyelids if he lay faceup in the sun all afternoon. Then his nose reminded him that the sun hadn't been visible this past afternoon. The air he breathed through a layer of straw was gritty with smoke and sulphur.

So, the druids had tied him cruelly, and then they'd covered him with straw to conceal him while they smuggled him out of the city. They wanted

him, or more of his story, but they didn't trust him.

Pavek sighed. He could understand that: no templar took trust for granted.

He considered announcing that he was conscious, but thought better of that impulse. Better to wait while his senses sharpened and his mind snared snatches of conversation from the world beyond his ears.

"What now?" An adolescent whine.

His mind struggled to find a name and threw up two: Zvain and Ruari. Ruari was correct; Zvain brought a different ache. He could tell himself everything had gone for the best, that an orphan's chances on the streets of Urik were better than a bound templar's in a handcart. Probably it wasn't a lie. The boy and he had squared whatever debts had stood between them. But there was an ache, distinct from the myriad body aches, and the half-elf's grouching only made it worse.

"I've never seen this place so crowded," Ruari continued when no one answered his question. "There's hardly a corner that doesn't have someone camped in it."

"No one wants to go farther, not tonight," a woman's voice—Akashia, the druid, the leader of his captors. "Not with that cloud lighting up the sky. There's a Tyr-storm brewing, Ru."

Brown-haired Akashia was beautiful in a way no hardened templar woman could ever be, but just as tough. The half-elf was smart enough to keep his mouth shut, and the cart jolted forward again.

Wherever they were, the cobblestones hadn't been reset in a generation.

A Tyr-storm. He hadn't heard that phrase before, but guessed its meaning. Tyr was the city that sent heroes, or fools—the barroom ballads he knew equated the two—out to challenge the Dragon. And, against all odds, the hero-fools had succeeded. Now the storms came, about as frequently as the Dragon had come for his toll of mortal life.

The Dragon's toll had been paid in slaves; anyone with a bit of luck or coin had nothing to fear. But the storms ravaged everything equally with

wind, hail, and rain. No one could buy luck when blue-green lightning filled the sky.

So why not name the storms after Tyr? Someone had to take the blame. Smoking Crown had been belching as long as anyone could remember, but the smoke hadn't bred storms until the fools of Tyr had slain the Dragon.

Between the blindfold-bandage and the straw, he couldn't see the blue-green lightning, but, straining his ears, he heard the now-and-again rumble of thunder. Dread greater than any pain filled his heart: he'd sooner be dead than confront a Tyr-storm trussed-up as he was.

"This is as far as we can go without a decision," Yohan, the third member of the trio said with a sigh.

The cart tipped as the old dwarf lowered the traces. Pavek slid forward, helplessly, toward the dwarf and the ground. Bolts of agony, sharper and brighter than the unseen lightning, racked his joints as the rope between his bound limbs and cart snapped taut. His ribs contracted and, with his not-inconsiderable weight suspended halfway in, halfway out of the cart, he tried to howl, but the sound strangled in his throat.

"Earth, wind, rain, *and* fire!" Akashia swore.

Yohan put a hob-nailed sole against his chest, shoving him backward as the cart leveled. Pavek could breathe again, and scream as the wheels swiveled, bounced, and rolled rapidly through the darkness.

"Hold these!" the dwarf barked, and the two-wheeled cart tottered as one of the others took his place between the trace-poles.

Straw was swept aside, and a massive, strong hand clamped over his forearm to haul him out of agony with the rude courtesy one veteran expected of another, even when they were on opposite sides.

"Look at his hands," Akashia whispered from somewhere near his head.

Her tone, midway between horror and disgust, was enough set him struggling, but Yohan's grip was firm.

"You've come close to crippling him," Yohan snarled, not toward the woman, so it was the half-elf, the whiner, who'd spit-tied him. "Give me

that knife of his, Kashi—”

A moment later, he felt cold steel against his right arm. He heard the unmistakable snap of stretched leather as steel sliced through his bonds and guessed that Ruari had tied him up with wet thongs. It was a templar tactic: leather shrank as it dried. He couldn't control his arms or legs as, one after another, they went from freedom to spasms. He ground his teeth together in a vain attempt to remain quiet, and when he could not, he swore vengeance against the half-elf scum.

“Easy,” Yohan counseled, shoving and pulling until he was sitting erect. “Water?”

Another pair of hands, Akashia's, unwound the cloth from his eyes. He blinked a moment, adjusting to the twilight, and gasped when he saw his swollen, discolored hands. Growling like a maddened beast, he lurched toward the lean silhouette at the corner of his vision. Yohan stopped him with one hand.

“Don't be a fool,” the dwarf hissed.

He let the fight go out of him. With no control over his fists, no strength in his legs, he was a fool. He slumped against the side planks of the cart.

“It's going to tip!” Ruari shouted, grappling with the traces—though whether to help or hinder was beyond Pavek's guessing.

Yohan planted his foot against the opposite side. The danger passed. “Water?” he repeated.

Of his three captors, the dwarf was clearly the most dangerous, but the two of them were playing by the same rules, by templar rules: victor and vanquished, power and prisoner. Right now water was more precious than life itself, but accepting it would establish the hierarchy between them, with him inescapably on the bottom. Pavek hesitated. The dwarf uncorked a jug and, tilting it recklessly, allowed water to trickle along his chin as he drank deep and loud.

“Yes—water.” Pavek surrendered. With effort and concentration, he got his jelly-boned arms to move, but Yohan had to steady the jug as he drank.

The liquid restored his will and cleared his thoughts.

Lightning lit the heavens with cool brilliance. Pavek braced for the gut-punch crack of thunder, which did not arrive for several moments and was distant—sounding when it did. The Tyr-storm would be violent when it arrived, but he, his trio of captors, and the other scurrying denizens of Modekan—he assumed they'd come to that village—still had ample time to prepare and dread.

“Can we trust him? Do we dare take him into the inn?” Akashia asked when the thunder had rumbled past.

Thrusting out his lower lip, Yohan blinked and shook his head. Pavek started to protest this judgment against his character, but the dwarf silenced him with a scowl.

“It’s not a question of trust; it’s those hands and feet. It’ll be midnight before he can use his hands, longer before he can walk. Anybody who sees him will think a question or two and somebody may guess the answer. Forty pieces is a lot of gold, Kashi. It’s not my decision, but if it were, I’d keep moving and go to ground when we reach the barrens.” Another flash of lightning—the same color as the druid’s eyes, or perhaps that was merely an illusion. Either way, her nose wrinkled as she looked from him to the storm and back again. Without offering a word, much less the decision they were all waiting for, she reversed the knife and aimed it for its sheath.

Pavek murmured, “Wipe it first—”

Akashia glowered as thunder rumbled and Yohan made a fist.

“—if you please, lady. There’s a stone on the back of the sheath. The blade’s as fine a steel as the dwarves of Kemelok ever made. It merits care.”

He had no idea who’d forged his knife, but any steel was worthy of respect, and mention of the last dwarven stronghold got Yohan’s attention, as he’d hoped it would. Akashia, seeing something like awe on the veteran’s face, swirled the blade carefully across the whetstone attached to the sheath.

Only Ruari missed the moment completely. “You aren’t going to let a mud-scum templar talk to you like that, are you? His kind never learns. He

still thinks he can give orders and we'll all grovel at his filthy, stinking feet. He'll sing a different song once Telhami's through with him—"

"Ruari!" Akashia snarled.

And Pavek looked immediately at Yohan, whose face reflected unspeakable weariness in the faint light. The dwarf had the requisite experience and wisdom, but he wasn't the druids' leader, and neither was Akashia. *That* honor belonged to someone named Telhami—a woman, by the name's cadence, and undoubtedly a force to be reckoned with.

"Well," Pavek demanded when no one else seemed inclined to say anything, "what are you going to do with me? Hit me over the head again and dump my body where the storm will finish your dirty-work?"

Akashia finished stropping the blade but before she returned it to the sheath she took a moment—or so it seemed—to examine the elaborate knotwork along the hilt, the knotwork that concealed his mother's hair.

He wanted the knife back because the worth of its metal was measured in gold; he wanted Sian's midnight hair back because its worth was beyond all measure.

"You value this?" she asked.

Her expression went beyond calculation or suspicion. Remembering the white fire she'd seared through his mind at the gate, he feared for his life, though common-lore said any mind with enough thoughts for stealing could defend itself against a mind-bender's invasion. But he felt nothing explicitly threatening, only the elusive sense that he was still being measured and judged.

"I value it, yes."

"How much?"

"To you, or to Telhami?" he countered, letting them know he'd heard Ruari blurt out that name. "Nevermind."

She secured the valued knife in its sheath and the sheath in a fringed bag suspended from her waist.

Lightning flashed and the thunder came quicker, louder. A merchant wearing silken robes scurried toward them. He spotted the four of them and

stopped suddenly, causing his tail of servants, carters, and apprentices to stumble against one another. One cart overturned completely with the sound of shattering glass.

“We’re doomed!” the frantic merchant wailed. “Doomed! The inns are full. The stables. There’s no place for an honest man to hide. Will you give me your place for ten pieces of gold?”

They looked at one another and at the wedge of ground where they stood. The place Yohan had selected for an urgent discussion lay between two tall, windowless walls and was as readily defensible as it was discreet. Another weight went on the balance pan in Pavek’s mind with the scales tipping toward a conclusion that Yohan had seen service with one or another of the sorcerer-kings.

He knew what he’d do in similar circumstances: accept manifest good fortune, ten gold pieces, and make his stand against the storm from somewhere else. But he wasn’t Yohan, and Yohan wasn’t in charge.

Akashia held out her hand, palm-up. “You have so many with you, and so much more to protect. To deny your request would be to deny the principles of life itself.”

The merchant extended his own, empty, hand toward her. He would have sworn he could hear both Yohan *and* the half-elf muttering. But at the last moment before an agreement would have been reached without any exchange of gold, silver or ceramic bits, Akashia made a fist.

“Was that eleven gold pieces you offered, good merchant, or twelve?”

“Good for her,” Yohan whispered clearly enough for Pavek to overhear despite another clash of thunder.

Pavek let his swollen hands hang loosely in his lap, hoping not to draw attention to them. His fingers twitched uncontrollably as blood slowly, painfully, restored feeling to lifeless nerves. Yohan’s concerns about his conspicuousness were valid: people would notice and people tended to remember what they noticed when gold was involved, whether it was a forty-piece bounty or the eleven pieces the merchant was dribbling slowly into Akashia’s hand.

He lowered his head, avoiding eye-contact with anything but his feet, until the cart was well-away from the merchant and his company.

“Good work, Kashi!” Ruari cried. “Now we can buy a room at the inn —”

“Don’t be a fool,” Akashia retorted as she and Yohan turned toward the open, unguarded village gate. “If eleven pieces of gold could buy a place at an inn, that merchant wouldn’t have given them to us.”

The wind had picked up. It blew with enough force to set the heavy gate banging on its hinges. Yohan turned the cart toward the public kank-pen, just inside the gate. A gust caught the disc-shaped wheels and threatened to dump them all on the cobblestones.

“We’re not going *outside*?” Ruari argued. “You’ve lost your wits. The storm! The kanks will go mad.”

“No madder than what’s left loose in this village.” Yohan stopped the cart and offered his brawny arm to Pavek.

Privately, Pavek sympathized with the half-elf. The kanks’ high-pitched droning raised the short hairs at the base of his neck. He’d never been so close to the big, black bugs before; kanks were banned within Urik’s walls and restricted to high-ranked templars at other times. Though they were considered docile creatures under ordinary circumstances, the storm bearing down on them was far from ordinary. Already the kanks inside the pen were milling in frantic circles. Every lightning flash illuminated their gnashing pincers, and in the darkness that followed, their mandibles shimmered with a faintly yellowish, liquid light.

He’d known kank drool was poisonous and wasn’t surprised that it stank worse than rotten broy, but he hadn’t expected it to glow with its own light.

The thought of riding a crazed kank into the teeth of a Tyr-storm scared him to the marrow, but he’d do it, if the druids gave him the opportunity, because Yohan was more right than Ruari. The cerulean storms went beyond natural elements. The wind and the icy hail—which had just begun to pelt the ground with nut-sized chunks—were only the harbingers. When

the storm's full fury was above them, it would drive some unfortunate men and women into madness.

Pavek recalled only too well the mobs outside the templar barracks during his two previous storms. Their screams were louder than the howling winds and their fists left bloody streaks on the plaster-covered stone walls. He doubted there was a wall or door in Modekan that could withstand such punishment.

He reached for Yohan's arm, but though he could feel the leathery texture of the dwarf's skin beneath his palm—a sure sign that he'd suffered no permanent damage while his limbs were bound together—his grip had no strength. Muttering words that were lost in the storm, Yohan hauled him out of the cart. Through great effort and an equal amount of luck, he managed to land on his nearly useless feet with his back braced against a fence post.

Before he could congratulate himself, the kanks crowded around him, palpitating his face with their flexible, sticky antennae.

"They like you, templar," Akashia chuckled.

He cursed and batted at the hovering antennae. The bugs retaliated by spraying him with their foul, poisonous drool. Fighting nausea, he shuddered uncontrollably, and chitinous pincers probed the backs of his knees. In a mindless panic, he tried to run, but his feet didn't cooperate, and he fell to his knees. He dragged himself beyond the kanks' reach, then, after assuring himself that they hadn't broken his skin, he uprooted a handful of scraggly grass and, with no regard for what was left of his dignity, swiped the radiant slime from his legs.

Several pulse-pounding moments passed before he heard Ruari laughing. It was one insult too many. He hurled the soggy grass in the half-elf's direction. His aim was off: the faintly glowing wad missed that wide-open mouth and splattered against his chest instead.

Ruari's laughter died in his throat. "You're dead, templar!" His teeth were visible in the lightning as he cleaned the mess from his shirt. When he was done, his fingers were curled into claws. "Because I'm going to kill you—"

But Akashia thrust her open hand between them. Her wrist waggled slightly. First, Ruari staggered backward, then a gust of wind punched Pavek's chest, knocking the fight out of him, too. Magic or mind-bending had somehow redirected the storm's gusty winds. The display was all the more impressive in its subtlety and casualness.

Pavek let go of his injured dignity. A templar knew when to lay low. A half-elf, apparently, did not.

"You saw what he did—"

Akashia's hand flicked again. Ruari sat down hard, wide-eyed with astonishment.

"Enough! Both of you. Behave yourselves or we'll leave you both behind... *together*."

"Kashi—"

"Don't 'Kashi' me," she warned. "Just stay here and stay out of trouble. Can you manage that?"

Ruari scrambled to his feet. "He's a templar, *Ah-ka-she-a*," he snarled each syllable of her name. "He's no good, and you know it. He's lying and deceit disguised as a human man. Look what he's done to us already. I say we leave him right here. Let the storm take care of him."

Through the tail of his eye, Pavek watched Akashia's hand fall slowly to her side and a variety of soft emotions parade across her face. She might be a druid and a mind-bender, but she wouldn't survive a single day or night in the templarate. Ruari, with his back to the storm and everything else, wouldn't last an hour. That left only the dwarf, at whom he dared a glance.

Yohan stood between the traces of the cart. His expression was properly opaque. If the dwarf had not been a templar, he'd spent enough time around them to learn their ways. Still, Yohan was waiting, not doing. He might be the shrewdest and wisest of his new companions, but he was the third of three in rank.

"What about you, templar?" Akashia asked. "Is Ruari right, are you lying and deceit disguised as a man, or can we trust you?"

He shook his head and chuckled. “That’s a foolish question. Why would I say no? Why would you believe me if I said yes? You’ve got to decide for yourself.”

“He’s right,” Yohan added, to Pavek’s surprise. “And we don’t have much time, if we’re going to get ourselves out of this place before the storm’s on top of us.”

Akashia flattened her wind-swept hair against her skull and closed her eyes. Pavek braced himself for another mind-bending onslaught, but none came—at least not into his mind. When the druid reopened her eyes her calm and confidence had been restored.

“You’re coming with us,” she said. “If you even *think* of lying or deceit, you’ll wish you’d never been born. You’ll do what you’re told to do, when you’re told to do it. And you’ll leave Ruari alone, no matter what he does or what he says. Understand?”

He nodded. “In my dreams, great one. In my dreams.” Akashia cocked her head. She seemed about to ask a question when Yohan called from the doorway of the kank-keeper’s shed, and she joined him there without saying anything more.

\* \* \*

Yohan and Akashia emerged from the shed leading four kanks. Three of them carried curving leather saddles that promised a secure, if not always comfortable, perch. The fourth, a soldier-kank half again as large as the others and; with numerous spikes growing out of its gnarled chitin, was rigged with a cargo harness. A large bone rack rose above the rear of the harness. Pavek spotted the curved brackets where the zarneeka amphorae had been slung and knew immediately where he was going to be riding out the storm.

At least he didn’t have to worry about controlling the creature. There was no way he could reach the bug’s antennae once he’d gotten himself wedged beneath the rack.

“We’re not going any farther than we have to,” Yohan assured him as he threaded a supple leather rope through man-made holes in several of the soldier-kank’s spikes.”

“We’ll dig in as soon as we find shelter.”

Pavek nodded with more confidence than he truly felt. The dwarf tied the rope to the back of his saddle. Akashia led the way through the unguarded gate; Yohan followed, Ruari brought up the rear.

They weren’t the only travelers who’d decided that safety lay in small, familiar groups beyond the village walls. Pavek lost track of the number of likely places they approached only to be warned away by well-armed men and women.

The Tyr-storm was almost above them. Lightning ringed the horizons and the thunder never ceased. Winds gusted from every quarter, sometimes bearing sulphurous grit from the Smoking Crown or sharp-edged pellets of ice. His companions huddled beneath thick, wool cloaks; Pavek had the shirt Oelus had given him. Cold, wet, and miserable, he curled up like an animal, eyes closed, enduring what he could neither control nor change. The kank’s six-legged gait had no rhythm his body could decipher. He slipped into a thoughtless state midway between sleep and despair and did not notice when the insect finally came to a halt.

“Move your bones, templar.”

Ruari’s snarl penetrated Pavek’s stupor. The rude jolt of a staff against his ribs roused him to action. He grabbed the smooth wood, noting with satisfaction that he’d recovered his strength. The half-elf twisted and tugged, but he couldn’t free his weapon. The Tyr-storm winds swallowed Ruari’s oaths as fast as he uttered them.

Pavek didn’t need to hear, he could read the words by lightning-light. Never mind that his former peers had put a price on his head, to Ruari he was *templar*, and personally answerable for all the many, many crimes his kind had committed. He straightened his arm, ramming the opposite end of the staff into Ruari’s gut. The youth staggered backward. His hands slipped from the wood and, in the flashing blue-green light, his expression changed from insolence to fear.

“Do that again, half-wit, and you’ll need a crutch, not a staff,” Pavek shouted and hurled the stick away.

He eased down to the ground. His muscles were cold-cramped, but nothing like before. He glowered at Ruari, confident that he could deliver his threat if the youth was foolish enough to make a move toward the staff.

A bolt of lightning slammed the ground a few hundred paces away. It stunned them both and left them standing like angry statues until Yohan strode between them. One lightning-lit scowl from the veteran dwarf brought them to their senses. Ruari ran away, leaving the staff behind. Pavek took his first conscious look at what his companions called shelter: the roofless remnant of a peasant’s mud-walled hovel, abandoned, no doubt, after an earlier Tyr-storm and melting as he watched.

He grimaced, Yohan scowled. Then they hobbled the kanks together, frontmost legs of one to the hindmost of another, and unlashed the harness from the soldier-kank’s back. Cursing and slipping, they wrestled the bone rack through the mud, into the remains of the hovel where Akashia and Ruari were already huddled in a leeward corner. Pavek thought there was room there for two more, but, before he could join them, Yohan struck his arm, pointing outside, where they’d left the kanks.

Size and strength conferred their own, sometimes futile, responsibilities. Following the dwarf, he returned to the storm. The bugs, which had circled so frantically in their Modekan pen, obeyed different instincts now that the storm was directly above them, crowding close together to make their own shelter from the pelting hail. He overcame his distrust and, with the lead ropes from two of the smaller kanks wound around his waist and wrist, clung to their clawed legs when the wind struck like a giant’s fist and thunder thumped; his gut.

His eyes adjusted to blue-green brilliance leaving him blind in those rare moments when lightning was not flashing. His ears grew deaf to the ceaseless thunder clash. Time and place lost meaning, yet, somehow, he was aware of a woman’s scream and cast aside the ropes. He strained his battered senses, but the only additional screaming came from the Tyr-storm itself.

He found himself ten long paces from the kanks, but couldn't remember moving his feet. His heart shivered; he hugged himself for warmth, reassurance.

*This is how madness starts.*

The thought, not quite his own, floated through his mind as he returned to the hobbled kanks and Yohan.

He was halfway there when the first erdlu ran by, so close that its scaly wings brushed against his arm. Then another flightless bird raced between him and the hovel, its movements frozen in series of lightning flashes. There were other shapes in the flickering light. Dozens of them, and dozens more. Familiar creatures: erdlus, kanks, giant spiders, and unfamiliar escapees from a madman's nightmare. They were all panicked, stampeding beneath the Tyr-storm, trampling everything in their path.

Including the hovel.

Pavek skidded into Yohan just as Akashia and Ruari emerged, as terrified as the stampeding creatures around them. They both ran toward him, Yohan, and the hobbled kanks, which together were large enough and solid enough to deflect the stampede to either side.

With her robes flailing around her, Akashia scampered toward the safety of Yohan's open arms. Ruari, hidden behind Akashia's billowing silhouette, tripped or slipped and disappeared. When Pavek saw the youth again, he lay writhing in the mud, head thrown back in anguish, arms wrapped around an obviously injured knee. A lightning flash of exceptional brilliance left Pavek blinking—blind, with the impression of an erdlu leaping over Ruari frozen in his mind's eye. Another flash, another impression: a kank veering, saving its balance at the last moment, and sparing Ruari's as well. The third flash and Ruari still writhed in the mud, but there was blood on his face: he'd expended a lifetime of luck and fortune in a few heartbeats.

Nearby, tightly confined by Yohan's arms, Akashia was screaming: the same sound Pavek had heard before. The veteran wound his hands into her hair, forcing her face against his shoulder. There was nothing she or her druid spellcraft could against the panic of a Tyr-storm. There was nothing

any of them could do, except watch in horror. Pavék forgot to breathe. It wasn't compassion that filled his lungs with fire. If there was a word for what he felt as the Tyr-storm roared, that word was outrage. Outrage because water, the most precious substance in all the world, had become deadly and life could be extinguished for no more meaningful reason than a slip in the mud.

Then he saw Ruari's staff, unbroken, almost within reach and, without an intervening thought, outrage became action.

Every would-be templar had to master five weapons before he wove his first messenger's thread through the hem of his sleeve: the sword, the spear, the sickles, the mace, and a man-high staff. The smooth hardwood was familiar in Pavék's hands. He cleared a path to the injured half-elf, planted his feet deep in the mud and, with a fierce bellow, defied the minions of the storm.

None of the panicked creatures, including the nightmare predators swept up in the stampede, was interested in a challenge, nor were they running so thick that they could not avoid a noisy, moving obstacle in their path. Pavék bashed at anything that came too close or seemed to hesitate, but the greatest danger came from Ruari, still clutching a knee and thrashing into his legs at unpredictable moments.

But he kept his knees flexed and retained his balance until the last immature erdlu had raced by. The Tyr-storm itself still raged. He fainted at the wind until Yohan appeared in front of him, shouting his name.

"Pavék! Back off, Pavék. Danger's passed."

Suddenly his arms were lead and the staff was the only thing keeping him upright. He stood calmly while Yohan, scooped the moaning youth and carried him to safety.

Then the shaking started.

He couldn't accept what he'd done. He had nothing but contempt for the fools of Tyr who'd challenged a dragon, yet he'd done something just as reckless and for less reason: for Ruari, who was a callow mongrel with a

streak of cruelty cut through his half-wit's heart, not worth a moment's mourning.

Yohan came back: one comradely hand between his heaving shoulders, steering him out of the fading but still-potent storm, offering a small-mouthed flask. He took a swig without thinking, just as he'd picked up the staff. A camphor-laced liquid made his eyes water. When his vision cleared, so had his mind. He sat on the ground, with Ruari's staff resting across his thighs.

There were fresh gouges all along the wood and a fractured chunk of chitin as long as his forearm wedged near one end. He traced the jagged edge with a trembling finger.

"You saved his life, templar—*Pavek*."

Akashia, beside him, didn't have to shout in order to be heard. The thunder was receding, and compared to what they'd been, the wind and rain were insignificant.

Pavek grunted, but kept his attention focused on the chitin chunk. His mind held no recollection of striking the creature who had lost it. Its dull yellow color was wrong for a kank. The inner edge was razor-sharp. He could have lost an arm, a leg, or his head.

"Your shoulder's bleeding, Pavek. May I tend it for you?"

Akashia knelt beside him, and noticing the gash for the first time, he began to shiver. She placed her hand on his brow. The shivering ceased. He didn't flinch when she peeled his shirt away from the wound, though he'd been to the infirmary often enough to know he was going to hurt worse before he felt better.

But the druid's touch was pleasantly warm. It soothed his nerves before numbing them. Maybe Oelus was right. Maybe there was something in the nature of the power King Hamanu granted his templars that caused pain. Or, just as likely, the infirmary butchers simply didn't care.

Curiosity got the better of him, as it often did. He observed Akashia's every move until the gash was a tidy scab some two handspans in length.

Words for thanks were hard to find in his mind, awkward on his tongue; he grunted a few about appreciation and respect.

“I owe you that and more,” Akashia assured him as she got to her feet. “I think I have misjudged you, Just-Plain Pavek. Without hesitation or thought of reward, you risked your life to save Ruari’s, after you twice swore to kill him. There is more to you than a yellow robe. You might be a man, after all.”

A hand came between them, long-fingered and lithe. It grabbed the staff and retreated.

“He’s a *templar*, Kashi. The worst kind of *templar*. He pretends to be what he’s not. Wash your hands after you touch him.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The huge blood-orange disk of the sun had climbed its own height above the eastern horizon when Pavék stretched himself awake, more refreshed than a battered man had any right to be after a half-night's sleep. No trace of the Tyr-storm remained—except for the crusted mud and the dark angular silhouettes of kes'trekels rising through the dawn, scouting the storm-wreck for scavenge.

Ruari sat beside a small fire. His right leg was thrust straight in front of him. The knee was swollen to the *size* of a cabra melon and was the color of yesterday's storm. The pot he tended exuded the alluring aromas of journey-bread softening and heating in spiced tea. Pavék's stomach woke up with a yowl, but the way things stood between himself and Ruari, breakfast would have to wait until the youth finished.

Nearby, Yohan cinched the cargo harness around the soldier-kank while the insect masticated a heap of forage. The adobe walls of the roofless hut had been reduced to muddy mounds, pocked with the deep tracks of panicked wildlife. Here and there, shards of pottery grew out of the mud: the trampled remnants of a good many of their water jugs.

There'd be more room for him on the cargo platform, less water.

Overall, it was a bad trade.

Two of the riding kanks were foraging nearby. He looked around for the third kank, and found it collapsed in the hardening mud, with Akashia crouched over its head. He wandered over for a closer look.

"It's no use," she said sadly. She'd heard someone coming, but hadn't raised her head to see who it was. "They're scarcely conscious of their own life. They shed whatever healing energy I can impart to them."

"It must be very frustrating to try so hard with such little result."

Weariness turning to wariness when Akashia craned her neck toward him.

"Just curious. Didn't mean to disturb you."

She sighed, tucked storm-tangled hair behind her ears, and faced him with the hint of a smile on her lips. “Are you sure you’re not Just-Curious Pavek instead of Just-Plain Pavek?”

Embarrassed for reasons he couldn’t decipher, he shook his head and retreated. Her almost-smile broadened into a grin, then faded. Ruari’s shadow—long, lean, and reinforced by his longer, leaner staff—fell between them.

“It’s no use,” Akashia repeated. “I cannot heal it, and it begins to suffer. Help me?”

There was no mistaking the question in her voice, or the need. Pavek thought he understood. Templar healers could kill without hesitation either on the battlefield or, afterward, among the wounded. A druid, whose powers did not flow from a sorcerer-king, might feel differently. Ruari seemed to have a sufficiently cruel temperament to enjoy what others might call mercy.

But Ruari laid down his staff. He sat opposite Akashia, carefully arranging his knee with his hands as he did. The joint was functional, but obviously sore and delicate. For a moment Pavek felt sorry for the troublesome half-wit whose life he’d saved, then everything was lost in astonishment. They pressed their pains together above the kank’s head.

With her eyes tightly closed, Akashia began a droning, wordless chant. The complex rhythms passed through her swaying body to Ruari, who began an eerie countermelody. Pavek’s mind filled with thoughts of death and desperate flight, but his curiosity was stronger, and he remained where he was while the pair wove a spell to end the kank’s suffering.

The insect had no eyelids to close over glazing pupils, no proper lips or nostrils through which a dying breath might pass; nonetheless, he knew the moment when its spirit departed. An inhumanly piercing wail seemed to emerge directly out of Akashia’s heart before she went suddenly silent and limp. Ruari held her wrists until he finished the chant with another ear-splitting wail.

So, Ruari was a druid, too.

Pavek hid his slack-jawed surprise behind a hand. His thoughts leapt to a comforting conclusion: if that sullen, vengeful scum could summon Athas's latent magic, then there was hope for a determined ex-templar who'd already learned the words and lacked only the music.

And he needed a full measure of hope later that day.

Within hours of settling himself among the remaining water jugs and empty racks on the soldier-kank's cargo platform, he looked across a landscape where there were no streets or walls.

No signs of life at all.

The gentle sloshing of the water jugs was a constant reminder of mortal vulnerability to the elements. He put his faith in the wheel and closed his eyes.

\* \* \*

They traveled steadily, uneventfully, from sunrise to sunset for two days. On the third day, for reasons Pavek could not guess and the others would not explain, they made camp early. Their journey-break was almost gone and more than half the jugs were empty. A man could survive out here beyond the city, if he was well-prepared and cautious. But not forever, not long enough to get back to Urik, even if he knew the way.

The only creatures that thrived in the parched badlands were the carrion-eating kes'trekels, always circling high overhead, vigilant for opportunity. Maybe the druids were lost. Maybe they'd realized there wasn't enough water to get them where they were going. Maybe Akashia and Ruari would hold their hands over him as he slept, and he'd never wake up again.

He resisted sleep until the moons, Ral and Guthay, were both above the eastern horizon and his companions were snoring softly. Then, remembering that the kank had not suffered, he let his eyes close. He wandered alone through a dreamless sleep and was still alive when morning

came. The druids were alive, too, though their expressions were as bleak as the land around them.

As he'd done on the other mornings, he helped Yohan secure the dwindling number of full jugs onto the cargo harness. Out of sight and earshot, on the far side of the huge soldier-kank, he asked the dwarf where they were going and when they'd get there. The dwarf answered: Quraite, and added nothing more. In frustration and rising fear, he asked Akashia the same question and got no answer at all, though Ruari, typically, had snarled an ominous: "You'll see when you get there, templar. *If* you get there. If the Fist of the Sun doesn't squeeze the life out of you first."

They started riding, Yohan on one of the rider-kanks, Ruari behind Akashia on the other, and Pavek alone on the cargo platform. Hot was hot, dry was dry, and the clatter of kank-claws over rock-hard dirt was not worth the hearing. Around midday he slipped into the senseless drowse that was a sane man's refuge on the badlands. A testament to the thought-addling power of heat and light, water-wasting tears streamed down his cheeks before he noticed that anything had changed.

They'd left the badlands for something worse: a natural pavement of dazzling white that extended from the claws of their kanks to every horizon. The plain was featureless, except for glittering powder swirls, fueled by the sun and darting through the utterly still air. The spirals collapsed without a sound or warning, as suddenly they'd appeared.

One passed close, spattering Pavek's face with sharp-edged grains. His tongue touched his cracked lips and tasted salt.

Yohan and the druids covered their faces with thong-tied chitin shields. Each shield had a narrow slit over the eyes to reduce the glare and a chin-length veil that blocked some of the stinging dust. Pavek assumed the otherwise careful druids would have packed an extra shield somewhere, but Ruari insisted that there were none to spare. Neither Yohan nor Akashia corrected him. So he raked his hair forward and pulled his shirt up over his head.

Heat wrapped itself around him. Even the kes'trekels shunned this place: the Fist of the Sun. Precious moisture leached through every pore of

his itching skin. He thought he might die and feared the druids would abandon him here with the soldier-kank, whose flesh was inedible, and a few jugs of water. All water would buy him was a few days of ever-increasing agony before he died.

When the air cooled, he thought that he had died, but it was only the sun setting.

\* \* \*

They watered the kanks, ate the last of the journey-break, and filled the waterskins that Akashia, Ruari, and Yohan carried with them on their smaller kanks, leaving the last water-jug half-empty. Then, as the first bright stars appeared in the lavender twilight, they remounted and continued their trek. Pavek didn't need to ask why they hadn't made camp on the salt plain: either they escaped the Fist of the Sun before it rose again, or they died. He cradled the last water-jug in his lap, listening to the precious liquid slap against the clay, a counter-point to the six-beat rhythm of the kanks' claws and the pounding of his heart.

Pale silver Ral and golden Guthay made their nightly journey through the stars. The faintest stars faded, the eastern horizon took on an ominous glow, and the crusty salt plain still stretched endlessly in all directions. He allowed himself two sips from the jug before pulling his shirt over his head.

He wished he'd stayed in Urik: King Hamanu's wrath could be no worse than the next few hours would be. He prayed that his mind died before his body. Then his mind emptied, and he waited to die.

\* \* \*

"As ever and always—a sight to make your heart sing in your breast!"

Yohan's voice drifted through the emptiness. The heat was gone, and with it, the scrunch of salt beneath the kanks' claws. Had his final wish been granted? Had his parched spirit slipped through the cracks in the Sun's

Fist? But, surely, the veteran dwarf would not have chosen to accompany him into the trackless afterlife.

Shrugging his shirt back to his shoulders, he shook the hair from his eyes, looked up, blinked and blinked again. Scrublands with their dusty grasses and waxy, thick-leaved shrubs had never looked so vibrant, and full of life, but the scrub paled before a swathe of rich, deep green directly ahead of them, as large, he guessed, as mighty Urik and crowned with *clouds*. Not the ugly, mottled harbingers of a Tyr-storm, but rounded hills as white as the salt plain behind them. Or was it behind them?

The forbidding waste was nowhere to be seen on either side or straight behind, and the sun, shining bright but mild, though in the right place overhead, seemed scarcely familiar. Reflexively, he clutched the empty space beneath his shirt where King Hamanu's medallion had hung.

"Quraite?" he whispered, rubbing his eyes and expecting to see something altogether different when he reopened them.

Akashia, riding behind Ruari now, heard his disbelief and turned around with a smile. "Home."

Carefully tended fields of grain marked Quraite's perimeter. Brick wells with wooden windlasses stood in the center of each field. The druids' oasis sat atop a reservoir large enough, reliable enough to send water to individual fields.

Within the fields a ring of trees grew to such density that whatever lay at the center remained hidden.

Trees.

In Urik, during the Festival of Flowers at the start of Rising Sun, ordinary citizens were permitted onto the streets of the royal quarter. Winding in long, slow lines, they'd wait all day for a chance to peek through the iron gates of King Hamanu's palatial garden where the fabled Trees of Life unfurled fragrant, short-lived blossoms. At other odd times during the years the fruit-trees nurtured in the atrium recesses of their wealthy houses would send clouds of perfume onto the nearby streets.

Sometimes the aromas incited riots among those who would never savor sweet nectar on their tongues.

Templars ate fruit regularly—it was one of their many privileges. But in all his life, Pavék had never seen a tree that was not surrounded by guards and walls.

The druids might call Quraite their home, but to Pavék, dizzy from heat, thirst, and days of traveling, it had the look of paradise.

\* \* \*

Breezes shivered the surface of a clear-flowing stream. Each ripple reflected the sky, creating a vast herd of cloud-creatures that raced westward, toward the setting sun. Telhami swirled her hand through the water, destroying the image. Every sunset, no matter how beautiful, was a moment of dying, and she did not like to dream of death. She moved her dream to the ever-growing grass on the stream bank.

A delicate flower the color of sunrise—bright yellow blushed with pink and amber—poked through the grass. Drops of nectar shimmered in its heart.

Long ago, the flower had had a name. Now it bloomed only in her dreams where memory ruled and names were unnecessary.

A crimson bee whirled out of nowhere. It drank the shimmering nectar, then rode the breeze to Telhami's ear.

"Akashia returns," it whispered. "She's got a *stranger* with her!"

The dreamscape vanished, replaced by a dry wind: the best Athas had to offer anymore, even here in guarded Quraite where druid spellcraft held the land and memory together.

"Grandmother, did you hear me? Are you awake?"

The voice belonged to a child, not a bee.

"Yes, I heard you, little one," Telhami replied, her eyes still closed. "Go fetch me a bowl of water. I'll be awake when you return."

She heard the light patter of bare feet running to the well. Children ran, grown folk walked, and she, herself, made the simple journey from dreams to wakefulness no faster than a tree grew. Then again, she'd made the journey so many times that it was no longer simple.

Everyone who dwelt in Quraite called her *Grandmother*, as had their parents before them. She'd been *Grandmother* to their grandmothers and though she was not as old as Quraite, she remembered the scents of vanished, nameless yellow flowers better than she remembered the loves and laughter of her youth.

She wasn't condemned to frailty. Druid lore offered many detours around the vicissitudes of aging, and many druids availed themselves of restorative spellcraft both directly and through the strength of their followers. In the misty years between then and now, Telhami had purged years, even decades, in a single moonlit night of spellcasting—until she'd acquired wisdom to understand that the way of life was age and, eventually, death. Pursuing immortality would eventually leave her no different than a Dragon or a sorcerer-king, and so, finally, she'd let the years accumulate.

Still, Quraite sustained her as she sustained, guarded, and protected Quraite. She was frail and tired easily. But she was also the master of her small, green world and grateful to be alive.

"I've brought your water, Grandmother. Are you awake yet? Are you ready to sit up?"

The folk of Quraite, including a dusky girl-child with solemn, watchful eyes and a translucent alabaster bowl carefully balanced on her outstretched palm, tended her, their beloved Grandmother, as carefully as she tended Quraite. "Yes, little one, I'm ready. How far away are they?"

Nothing within Quraite's perimeter was beyond her ken. She could have determined Akashia's location with little effort. But a little effort was more than she wished to expend, especially when the child was near-bursting with the answer.

"They're among the fields. One of the kanks is gone, and—Grandmother—the *stranger* is a great ugly and dirty man with snarly hair. He's dressed in rags."

“Is he?” she said, smiling. “Well, then we’ll have to give him clean clothes and teach him to bathe, won’t we?”

She swung her legs over the edge of the woven-reed sleeping platform.

Kashi’s mind had been full of the stranger some nights’ past when she’d sent her thoughts ahead of the storm, seeking guidance. The impression Telhami’d gotten then had been considerably different from child’s description now. Her curiosity was piqued, and she took the translucent bowl firmly in both hands.

Strangers came infrequently to Quraite. Some found it on their own, others needed assistance. Either way, strangers were welcome to stay as long as they wished, or forever. For though strangers came to Quraite, strangers did not leave. The precise location of the verdant land Telhami guarded was too great a temptation to entrust to anyone who would not dedicate her or his life to its preservation. More than one hesitant stranger rested among the twisted roots of the ancient trees in her private grove.

But, mostly, those strangers who came to Quraite had been searching for it, and surrendered willingly to its spirit. During her guardianship, the green lands of Quraite had spread measurably across barren waste far to the northeast of Urik. When she arrived, there were only a dozen great trees left in an isolated grove, now there were more than a dozen interconnected groves, each nurtured by a man or woman who’d started out a stranger, or a stranger’s child.

Of course, nurturing a druid grove required innate talents. At any time) the greater number of the oasis’s inhabitants were ordinary folk who worked the fields, tended the animals, or provided a brawny escort when Quraite needed to trade with the Lion-King in Urik.

Without prying, which she had not done during the storm and would not do now, there was no guessing why Kashi had wanted to bring a Urikite stranger home to Quraite. Perhaps she’d succumbed to some rough-hewn city-bred allure. Druids certainly weren’t immune to reckless passion: They venerated the wilder aspects of nature. They took risks, sometimes foolishly.

And Kashi was a young, vigorous woman who looked upon the men of Quraite as brothers, not suitors. It was only natural that she might stumble upon her first love in Urik. That was, after all, no small part of the reason why Telhami sent her there in the first place—With Yohan, of course, to watch over her. Two or three human generations ago, the veteran dwarf had been a stranger in Quraite himself. He strode out of the salt barrens in the heat of the day, alone and afoot, guided, he'd said, by an emptiness in his heart. From that first moment she'd trusted his dedication as she'd trusted few others. She bared the mysteries of her grove to him by moonlight but, try as he might, poor Yohan couldn't grow weeds behind an erdlu-pen. The druids' path was closed to him.

Still, Yohan had his own gifts. Between sharp observation and a vestigial mind-bending talent, he could measure a stranger's temper in a single, squinted glance.

If that ragged, ugly and dirty stranger Kashi had hauled out of Urik had harbored a harmful thought toward druids in general or Kashi in particular, he'd have died long before the Fist of the Sun closed around him. Kashi had become Yohan's focus years ago, when her mother died. Yohan would protect her with his life, or spend hereafter as a wailing banshee.

Thoughts of Akashia and Yohan brought a smile to her lips and energy to her limbs. She sipped the water if of Quraite, giving appropriate thanks to spirits both living and inanimate who made it crisp, dear, and refreshing, then she swallowed the test in two gulps.

"Bring me my hat and veil, little one. They've reached the trees. We don't want to keep them waiting, do we?"

"No, Grandmother," the child agreed, taking the bowl from her hands before fetching the hat from a peg in the center post of the straw hut.

Telhami bowed her head, but only a little. Once she'd been as tall as Akashia; now she was no taller than a gap-toothed girl-child. When the gauzy veil had been looped around her neck and shoulders, she took up a gnarled wooden staff and left her shady hut. Even with the veil, the burning sunlight hurt her eyes. The girl lead her to the center of the circular village where the travelers and the stranger awaited.

Any journey to Quraite was a strenuous experience. When the journey was compounded by the Smoking Crown storm, which fury Telhami had sensed in her momentary mind-bending contact with Akashia, it was no surprise that the travelers seemed weary to the point of exhaustion. Kashi accepted the steadying hands of her friends and neighbors as she dismounted; Ruari, riding doubled-up behind her and favoring a swollen, discolored knee, clearly needed them. Even Yohan was a shade slow leaping down from his kank's saddle.

But no amount of hard-traveling, wind, rain, or mud could account for that tattered stranger atop the soldier-kank. He was, as the girl-child promised, a big man—although his cramped position, wedged beneath the cargo racks, had made him seem larger than he was. His face was marred by a much-broken nose. There was an old scar twisting his upper lip and new ones streaked across his cheek. She had to look at him with her mind's eye to see that he was still a young man, no more than a few years older than Kashi herself—

Where *had* Kashi found him? Sleeping drunk in some Urik alley?

The stains and tears in the stranger's clothing were older by far than the storm. His hair and beard hadn't been properly groomed in weeks. There was a story here, and she could feel her old-bones weariness melt with anticipation of hearing it.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a breeze of children bearing three bowls of water among them, one for each of the returning Quraiters: Akashia, Ruari, and Yohan. There no water for the stranger, who was not yet a part of the community or its traditions.

Brawny humans suffered almost as much as half-giants in the Fist of the Sun. The stranger's thirst hung like an aura around him, an aura she observed closely through her veil. He stood still, like the kanks, while the others drank, giving away nothing of his inner character.

A strange stranger, indeed, if he could watch mouthfuls of water splash and vanish in the dirt without blinking his eyes or running a pasty tongue over salt-cracked lips.

Where *had* Kashi found him?

And though she'd kept the question strictly within her own thoughts, Kashi looked her way before returning her half-full bowl to the children. Kashi pointed them in the stranger's direction and gave them a gentle shove before coming over.

"I have brought a stranger to Quraite, Grandmother," she said in the formal tones the occasion required. "He calls himself Just-Plain Pavek. He acted without thinking to save Ruari's life during—"

"He's no stranger! He's a *templar*!" Ruari interrupted, surging between the just-named Pavek and the children, knocking the bowl out of their hands before the stranger got anything to drink. "A street-scum, filthy, yellow-robe *templar*. Don't trust him, Grandmother. Send him away before he brings more disasters on us. Put him beneath the trees!"

She felt a gasp of horror and revulsion ripple through her community. Ruari's snarling, desperate face blocked her view of Pavek, but sidelong glances at Akashia and Yohan confirmed the basic truth of the youth's angry words. The pieces fell into place: the scars, the resignation, the apathy on the smooth, hard surface of his mind.

It was easy to think of templars as beasts; they thought of each other, and themselves, that way.

But Akashia had brought him here, and Yohan had permitted it. "Why?" she whispered, unable to purge the shock and outrage from her voice. "What place can there be for a *templar* in Quraite?"

"A former *templar*, Grandmother. A fugitive." Akashia replied in an uncertain voice. "The *templatate* put a forty-gold-piece price on his head because he's seen our *zarneeka* powder transformed into something he calls 'Laq'—"

Her ancient heart stuttered, and she heard the rest of Akashia's words with half an ear. *Laq*... older than the oldest trees, older than King Hamanu or his square, high-walled city, the syllable-sound awakened sadness and fear in Quraite's guardian spirit. *Zarneeka* bushes had survived since the days of abundant water in the shade of the trees Telhami and her predecessors nurtured. As the trees had spread, *zameeka* had spread, too, until there was enough to share with the downtrodden and aching folk of

Urik, who called it Ral's Breath. But Laq, like the delicate yellow flower of her dreams, had been forgotten.

Until now.

Who had dredged Laq from its well-deserved grave?

Hamanu?

The Lion-King had the skills and the inclination to wrest the dark secrets from the dilute powder called Ral's Breath, but if he or his defiler-minions had done so, they would have given their seductive poison a self-celebrating Urikite name.

"Grandmother—? Grandmother—?" Akashia knelt quickly, her wind-blown hair trailing on the ground before her. "I'm sorry, Grandmother. It seemed as if he told the truth; at least he believes he tells the truth. I thought—I thought you should hear him yourself, *see* him yourself. It's my fault. Mine alone. Ruari never trusted him, not for a moment"

She rested gnarled hands gently atop the younger woman's head. Of course Ruari had not trusted the stranger. Ruari couldn't look at a human man without thinking of his father, and when that human man was also a templar the hatred redoubled. No matter that this Pavek was much too young to have been the yellow-robed scum who'd ravished Ruari's elfin mother and left her for dead in the midden-heaps outside Urik's walls.

*That* man was long dead. Ghazala's kin might have shunned her while she carried her ill-gotten son, but they'd avenged her promptly. For Ghazala and the rest of the Moonrace tribe, it was over, forgotten. For Ruari, the hatred had begun at the moment of his lonely birth and was entwined in his own flesh, neither wholly elf nor human. It wouldn't end for Ruari until he accepted himself—which Telhami did not expect to see, even if she lived to be twice her current age.

Where human men or templars were concerned, young Ruari's opinion could not be heard first. She circled Kashi's face with her fingertips, lifting the younger woman's head.

"There's no fault. Not yet. Let this stranger speak for himself."

Akashia moved aside.

“Templar of Urik, stand before me!” She thumped her staff on the ground authoritatively, but she didn’t invoke Quraite’s guardian to cast a spell, nor did she release mind-bending energy.

“My name is Pavek,” he said, taking the first step of his own will. “I was a templar, a regulator, but no longer. No longer of Urik, either. I’m just plain Pavek, unless there’s another Pavek here already; then call me whatever you wish. I’ve been a dead man since I saw a slave distilling black poison from gold wine and your yellow powder. There’s nothing you can do to frighten me, Telhami, druid of Quraite—”

“On your filthy knees, *templar!*”

Ruari swung his staff at the stranger’s head, but even with the strength and speed of youth, he was neither strong enough, nor fast enough, to land the blow. This time Telhami did invoke the guardian, and with its aid, traversed the three paces between herself and the half-elf in a heartbeat. Her staff, carved from a living branch of the oldest tree in her grove, absorbed the sweep of Ruari’s wrath. His body trembled as a backlash reverberated through his limbs and his tawny copper skin turned livid.

“Enough.” She chastised with mind-bending more than words. “*Enough*. Allowances have been made ever since the Moonracers left you behind. Children worship their parents with love, and suffer when that love is not returned; but you are no longer a child.”

“He is a *templar*,” Ruari insisted, his voice little more than a whisper. “I know what his kind is like.”

“As elves and humans know yours?” she replied with compassion that drained the angry flush from his face.

Shoulders slumped and chin hanging against his chest, Ruari retreated a single, unsteady step. “I’m sorry. Grandmother.” The top of his head moved, but not enough to bring his eyes in line with hers. It dropped again, and he retreated to the farthest edge of the gathering.

She knew what she would have to do if Ruari failed to transform his anger into integrity; she hoped it would never be necessary. Then she thrust

her hopes aside and scrutinized Just-Plain Pavék through the mesh of her veil. “Tell me more. Tell me about the slave.”

Pavék blinked once, and his lips tightened before he said, “A halfling slave—”

“A halfling *slave*?” she interrupted scornfully. “Only a fool would enslave a halfling. Their spirits wither in captivity. Only a fool would say that he saw a halfling slave making poison.”

“I saw what I saw: A *halfling* slave distilling Laq. His cheeks were carved and blackened. Any Urikite would recognize the pattern as House —”

With a shake of her staff and a surge of mind-bending energy, she nailed the templar where he stood. Anger brought the appropriate memories swimming to the surface of his mind, where she could discern them and their truthfulness. Quickly, she knew as much as she needed to know. Zar-neeka was a halfling word, left from the rime when they and humans dominated a moist, green Athas. As Athas withered, it had seemed that the halflings withered and forgot. But Laq was a halfling word, too. Whatever the halfling was doing, he was no slave, and it was a prudent certainty that he’d recovered more than one mote of ancient knowledge. The rest—the name of his nominal master and the extent of the lion-King’s involvement in the treachery—could remain in the murky depths of a templar’s mind, for now.

The knowledge would be safe there. Templars did the very thing halflings could not: they hid the truths of their lives from themselves. It was the only way they survived.

But Just-Plain Pavék was an imperfect templar. He had a hefty price on his head and a worried look on his face now that his muscles and his thoughts were his own again. The edge was gone from his stolid confidence.

“I’ve come to trade with you, druid. Knowledge for protection. While I wore the yellow, I had free run of the king’s archives. I read scrolls of magic theory and practice that no eyes had seen for generations. I committed them to memory. The scholars mocked me because, with my

rank, I could never hope to recite the invocations I'd learned. But I did learn them, and I'll share them with you, for a price." He cast a wandering glance at the trees, and her staff. "I'm certain you have the rank to use them."

She let the offer hang between them. There was little doubt that more than a few of those long-hidden scrolls had been written by her hand. She'd been a proud scholar once, and she'd paid the price of pride. Pavek's precious knowledge was no temptation. He'd overplayed himself, which suited her purposes perfectly. They could barter old spell-craft until she decided what to do about the reemergence of halfling alchemy.

"What is your price, Just-Plain Pavek?"

"A place to stay, food to eat, water to drink."

"For how long?" she asked, taking the same tone she'd used with Ruari. "What do you truly want? Spells in the palms of your own hands, not some lump of clay hanging from your neck?"

It was merely logical: why else would a man—a scarred, battered man with burnt-out eyes—commit useless lore into his memory? She smiled beneath her veil. She'd teach him, as she'd tried to teach Yohan, if he answered truthfully. She'd bind him to her own purposes no matter how he answered.

\* \* \*

Pavek would have risked gold to see beneath that raggy veil. He had no gold. He had nothing at all except the truth, which he risked with toothy defiance.

"Yes," he answered loudly enough for everyone, even Ruari on the fringes, to hear. "Yes. Give me spells in the palms of my hands. Make me a druid."

A ripple of nervous laughter passed among the Quraiters, reminding him of the smile on Oelus's face when he'd made a similar request. He was conscious of his hands closing into fists and the need to quash the mockery,

starting with the faceless crone in front of him who'd tilted her head like an eyeless bird and clicked her hidden tongue against her teeth.

"Is it so simply done, Just-Plain Pavek? Did you memorize a little cantrip that would transform you from parasite to druid? Bend down and whisper it to me."

He stayed as he was. There were no such invocations. He'd risked everything and missed the mark. Again. Why did he dream of magic when life's least lessons continued to elude him? "The scrolls say only that there must be a mentor and a willing student. I am willing."

"Good!" she cackled and struck the ground with her staff. "Come to my grove. We'll start at once."

For an instant the staff glowed green; then it and Telhami were gone. Vanished. With only the words—"Do not fail me, Just-Plain Pavek. Follow the wind from the center—" whispered in a fast-dying breeze.

"Earth, wind, fire, *and* rain!" Ruari exclaimed, turning the invocation into a curse. "A *templar* invited to Grandmother's grove."

The other Quraiters gathered around the empty place where Telhami had stood. They averted their eyes, neither agreeing with the half-wit, nor chastising him for putting their own thoughts into words.

"Start walking, *templar*. Grandmother's waiting for you," Ruari continued. "You better say good-bye, *templar*, and start walking. But you'll never find it, not if you walk forever. Your *bones* will walk 'til they crumble into dust.

The jest's on you—"

"That's enough, Ruari," Akashia said sternly, but her eyes were troubled, and she looked away when he stared directly into them.

"Grandmother awaits you. You must find her; you can't stay here."

They were already standing at the center of Quraite, where there wasn't any wind now that the breeze from Telhami's departure had waned. He raked sweat-stiff hair away from his face. His tongue was swollen, and his lips were salt-cracked. He wanted to sit in the shade with a bowl of water,

but these druids, who held themselves far above Hamanu's templars, wanted him to kill himself walking through the desert.

"A cool wind blows from the center, from the grove," Akashia assured him, as if she'd sensed his thoughts. "Feel it on your face and follow it to the grove."

He spun in place, not expecting to feel a cool breath of air, and not finding one, either. Like Ruari, Yohan stood slightly apart from the rest, with his arms folded across his chest and the index ringer of his right hand tapping above his left elbow.

Once, twice, three times, and a pause; then, once, twice, three times before another pause.

A signal. Pavek was grateful for the gesture, though he had no idea how to interpret it.

Ruari taunted him again: "Can't feel a thing, can you, *templar*?" The smile twisting the half-elf's lips was worthy of Elabon Escrissar, another half-elf. "Maybe you'll die standing instead of walking."

He squared his shoulders and started walking toward the smirking youth. One step. Two steps. A third, and Ruari was within arms' reach. If he was going to die anyway, there was a great temptation to take the half-wit with him. But he contented himself with a smile of his own, the particular lopsided smile that made his scar throb and revealed his teeth at the corner of his mouth.

Ruari's smirk melted into an anxious pout; he took a sideways step and braced himself behind his staff. Pavek narrowed his eyes until the scar burned. He shouldered past Ruari and kept walking.

He was well beyond the oasis before he reached up to soothe the sore flesh and agitated nerves.

By then, a cool breeze was blowing against his face.

## CHAPTER NINE

“Welcome. I’ve been waiting for you. Sit down and be comfortable. We’ve much to discuss, you and I. Much to learn about each other. Are you hungry? Thirsty? Your wishes shall become commands.”

Zvain took a tentative step into the dusky, carpeted chamber. He dared a glance at his host, who wore an unadorned, bleached robe and sat amid similarly colorless cushions.

The master of this domain was an ageless-seeming man with pale skin and impassive features, topped by long, faintly yellow hair. His hands were folded in his lap. His face was lean and angular: elven, or partly so. His eyes sloped more than human eyes, but they were shadowed by brows of human heaviness.

Zvain could not determine their color, or more importantly, their focus.

He wanted to see those eyes very much, for although the master’s voice was cordial and the chamber more than inviting, he’d just been released from considerably less congenial surroundings where his wishes, when he’d dared express them, had brought him blows, mocking laughter, and curses.

“On your knees with an answer, boy!”

A cheek-scarred mul struck him between the shoulders. He staggered forward but caught his balance before his bare feet touched the carpet. Generally, he had a free man’s pity for branded slaves, but he felt no such soft emotion for the armed and armored brute who, with a succession of punches and kicks, had herded him through the long, empty corridors.

If his wishes had suddenly become commands, he knew what he wanted: “Send *him* away,” he said hoarsely, flicking his thumb toward the mul. His throat was raw from too much crying and fear. “That’s my wish.”

The shadows beneath the blond man’s brows deepened. He blinked, then said: “Therdukon, you are dismissed.”

“Your will, my lord.”

The countless sharpened scales of Therdukon's body-armor clattered against each other as the mul saluted and spun smartly on the hard leather heels of his similarly defended boots. A dozen jangling footfalls echoed before the sounds faded entirely. Zvain was impressed, but not entirely reassured. He'd seen enough on the streets to know that a master who filled his bodyguard with noisy bullies was apt to be a bully himself, with all the wrath that went with tenderness of pride.

So he stayed where he was, one step into the chambers with his toes worrying the knotted fringe of the carpet.

"What else, boy? Or will you sit now that we're alone?"

The man extended an elegant left hand toward a hassock that, after weighing the risks of obedience against those of suspicion, Zvain approached cautiously. He circled the unfamiliar mound of plush upholstery, noting rays of sunlight filtering through the plaster fretwork between the ceiling and the top of the wall. He could guess the time—early afternoon—from the angle and color of the light. But not the day. The morning harangues had not penetrated the walls of his cell.

He stopped circling and faced his mysterious host.

"How long was I imprisoned?"

They were closer to each other now. The lean face lifted slightly; light struck the hidden eyes. They were dead black: hard, sharp, and compelling. Zvain's knees gave out, and he collapsed on the hassock, which breathed a mighty sigh through its seams and tassels. He stiffened as he sank into its depths, then felt foolish: the sound had been nothing more than air escaping the cushions.

The master chuckled, a hearty, deep-pitched sound. He righted himself in the cushions and found his courage.

"How long?"

"No time at all. Imprisoned." Pale lips curved into a smile. "You were delirious when you arrived here. We feared for your life, and—surely you can understand—for our own. You could not answer the simplest of questions: who you were or where you had been before the illness struck.

For safety's sake we isolated you. Think of the last four days as quarantine... and consign them to a forgotten past now that you've recovered your wits."

Lies. He hadn't been struck ill. He'd been struck hard from behind and knocked unconscious. The lump still throbbed. And he'd been imprisoned: a dank, windowless chamber behind a bolted door was a cell, not a sickroom. He tried to shame his silk-voiced host with a dramatic frown, but he was no match for those dead, black eyes. Thoroughly defeated, he stared at the carpet.

"You have recovered your wits, haven't you?" The pale man chuckled again. This time there was palpable malice weaving through the mirth. He rang a small crystal bell.

A boy came immediately through a drape-concealed door, a heavy ceramic serving tray balanced on his shoulder. A bright and fashionably elaborate tattoo covered his cheek. Zvain wouldn't have noticed the tiny brand scars if he hadn't been looking for them.

The slave gasped and stopped short, the tray tottering in his hands. Zvain followed the slave's glance to a short-legged table upended against the wall, where it was obviously not expected to be. He met the other boy's eyes and shared his panic. It would have been no effort to help his age-mate, but the slave-master watched, and he stayed where he was.

He couldn't breathe as the slave hooked a foot around a table leg, righted it, and dragged it slowly across the carpet. The tray tilted precariously more than once. Crockery slid and clattered, but nothing spilled, nothing fell, nothing broke before the tray sat in its proper place. The slave sank to his knees, trembling with relief. Zvain stuffed his own trembling hands beneath his thighs.

The tray displayed delicacies guaranteed to attract the attention of any boy, slave or free: morsels of crispy meat, dried fruits glistening with honey and powdered spices. What little he'd eaten in the last four days did not deserve to be called food. His mouth began to water, and his gut betrayed him with a rumble.

"Eat whatever you want, as much as you want."

The slave-master's silky voice squelched his appetite. There were countless ways to tumble from freedom into slavery. One way was to perform a slave's work; he'd avoided that. Another way was to fill one's gut before one knew the price of the meal. While the tattooed slave mixed water and herbs for tea, Zvain rubbed the lump on his skull.

He assumed that he'd fallen prey to one of Urik's innumerable slavers. It seemed a reasonable guess and, in a way, inevitable. Orphaned children didn't starve in King Hamanu's city. If they couldn't attach themselves to someone bigger and stronger, they got snatched by slavers. He'd tried to attach himself to someone bigger and stronger: Pavek, the templar. But that hadn't worked.

His own fault.

Pavek had come to him with promises of vengeance, but had seemed more interested in groveling for his old friends at the city-gate. Zvain remembered that last day. They'd quarreled in the morning and barely patched things up before Pavek started working up his day's sweat. He'd promised to pray for the man, then been told to stay put. Pavek was always giving him contradictory orders. To show his mettle, he'd wandered off, but Pavek was gone when he got back. An old man said itinerants had hired Pavek to guide them through the city streets. And he, gith's-thumb fool that he was, had gone searching after his supposed protector.

Pavek's fault.

If that blundering templar hadn't blundered into his life he'd never have been wherever he had been when the slavers caught up with him.

The slave finished making the tea. He bowed to his master and left the chamber without having said a word. Belatedly, Zvain wondered if the other boy's tongue had been cut out and, not surprisingly, his own tongue soured. "There's caution, Zvain—"

He sat bolt upright; until that moment he'd believed—hoped—the slavemaster hadn't known his name. He didn't remember giving it away, but the lump on his skull covered an empty spot in his memory. Maybe he *had* been delirious... Certainly, he couldn't be too cautious, now.

“And there’s foolishness. I can taste your fear, Zvain: that’s the taste of foolishness. I know you’re thirsty; I offer you tea.” Using his left hand only, the slave-master filled a shallow bowl with fragrant, red-amber tea and pushed it closer.

He shrank away as if the tea were poison, as it could well be.

“A man *can* starve himself in the presence of food, but he can’t not drink. You’re thirsty, Zvain. Desperately thirsty. Why not slake your thirst? What are you afraid of?”

Zvain shook his head, not daring to speak. The hard-eyed slave-master was right. With each breath, each heartbeat, the tea grew less resistible.

“Watch—I’ll drink from your bowl myself—” And the half-elf did, draining it in two deep swallows. When he lowered his hands, the tea had stained his lips crimson. “Would I do that if it were poisoned?”

Possibly, poisoners usually developed a tolerance for their preferred poisons, strictly to reassure their victims. But Zvain’s concerns weren’t about the purity of the tea.

“I won’t eat your food or drink your tea. I won’t take anything from you. I’m free, and I don’t want to become a slave.”

The slave-master sat back with a dramatic sigh. “First it’s prisons, now it’s freedom and slavery! Where do you get such suspicious thoughts, Zvain? You were brought to my house sick and witless. If it’s *awing* you’re worried about”—his voice turned harsh and Zvain looked up; owing was exactly what he was worried about—“it’s a little late for caution. You already owe me your life, boy.”

Zvain was speechless. His jaw dropped, but words refused to form.

“Eat the food I offer, Zvain; you’ve eaten it already.” The slave-master brought his right hand out of the folds of his tunic, revealing red-and-black enameled talons fastened over the tip of each finger. He speared one of the spiced fruits and brought it delicately to his mouth. He reached for another, but paused with one talon pointed at Zvain’s heart “If I meant you harm, boy, nothing would spare you. Do not tempt me with what you do not want.”

An enameled talon flicked downward, piercing a honeyed bit of fruit. “Take what I offer you,” the slave-master purred as he raised the talon.

Touch that food, Zvain told himself, and he’d be fed, clothed, sheltered, and *owned* as surely as if he’d been paraded naked through the slave market. But freedom was precious only when you had coins in your pocket.

Deliberately ignoring the morsel on the slavemaster’s talon, he selected the smallest of the remaining fruits. He chewed it slowly. The spices crunched, the honey filled his throat with a subtle warmth that tickled his nose from the inside and made his eyes water. He’d seen folks drinking mead, broy, and the other liquors that reddened their faces and made them laugh too loudly at things that weren’t funny. He’d seen folks slumped in corners, half-empty bowls still clutched in their hands, and he’d seen them retching when the morning sun struck their eyes. He’d sworn to his mother that he’d never be so foolish.

And his mother was dead.

He reached for a second morsel and chewed it as slowly as he had the first, meeting the slave-master’s black eyes as he did. The fear was still there, but far to the back of his thoughts. He pretended it was gone, and, after a moment, it was.

“How did a fine, intelligent boy like you come to be dressed in rags, scrounging garbage in the elven market?” Wariness nudged his rapidly blurring thoughts: He didn’t now where he’d been when he’d been hit over the head, but it hadn’t been the elven market, and he said so:

“Not th’ elven market. Not *scroungin’*, neither.” His mouth felt... odd. His tongue, odder.

“What were you doing?” the slave-master asked patiently, using his unencumbered hand to pour another bowl of tea.

Zvain slurped the amber liquid eagerly. He was wiping his mouth on his forearm when the chamber began to spin. A fast grab to the cushions steadied the chamber, but sent the bowl flying. The slave-master held out his taloned hand. The bowl slowed, swerved, and drifted to a halt on the pale palm.

“Oh, no—” Zvain murmured. His gut rolled. Color drained from his vision.

“What were you doing in dyers’ plaza? Why were you running? What were you looking for in the cloth maze? What or whom?”

Dyers’ plaza...? The cloth maze? Yes, he began to remember more clearly. The people he’d asked about Pavek and the itinerants had said that they’d seen a quartet of that description going into the dyers’ tangle of freshly colored lengths of cloth. He’d entered the maze blindly, full of anger that Pavek had abandoned him before he’d been able to abandon Pavek. An errant breeze had brought a familiar voice to his ears.

*...that... powder... turned into... Laq—*

Laq.

Zvain and his anger lurched sideways, then righted themselves.

Pavek’s groveling and sweating had been part of a plan after all: he’d found the Laq-sellers. If vengeance was to be had for his mother’s death, for the death of the man he called his father, he’d been determined to be a part of it. Deep in drunken memories of unusual vividness, he flailed through the dyers’ cloth, but the air was still. Pavek’s voice no longer came to him.

He almost shouted Pavek’s name aloud before he remembered that there was a price on the former templar’s head.

“Who, Zvain? Who are you looking for? Who do you seek?”

He blinked and rubbed his eyes. A shadowy outline of the slave-master’s gaunt face rippled across the lengths of red and yellow cloth. “No,” he whispered, something was terribly wrong, but he couldn’t quite decide what it was. He shook his head. A mistake: everything started to spin. “No one.” He reached for the cloth to keep himself from falling. It melted in his hands.

“Who, Zvain?”

He heard the cracks and groans of a man being beaten. Pavek. Templars weren’t clever, not the way boys raised beneath the city streets were clever,

the way he was clever. Pavék had blundered in some typically templar way, and the Laq-sellers were pounding him.

The dyers' cloth became gauzy, then transparent, then disappeared completely and the square was deserted, except for three people beating a fourth. The itinerants were an ugly trio, the worst-looking specimens of their kind he could imagine: a warty human woman, a hairy dwarf, and an elf with a pendulous nose and sagging belly. But they had the better of Pavék, who was on his hands and knees, blood pooling on the paving stones.

Once again, the templar's name formed in his throat; once again he swallowed before it escaped.

"Who, Zvain?"

The voice came from behind. He spun and saw nothing.

"Who?"

He spun around again. The Laq-sellers continued to pummel Pavék, who was crawling toward him.

"Answer me, Zvain!"

There was nothing to account for the voice that echoed off the walls of the empty square. The speaker was unseen.

*Unseen...*

Mind-bending masters of the Unseen Way were, by the very nature of their talent and practice, more hidden than those who wore the Veil. To his knowledge, Zvain had never met an Unseen Master, but he knew how mind-benders could turn a young man's world inside out, trapping him in his own memory, attacking him with the horrors of his own imagination. Tales said that every sentient creature had the instinctive power to cast out even the most potent mind-bender, but he, staring in panic at the cloudless sky of his memory and imagination, had no idea how to defend himself.

"Zvain!"

A different voice this time. Familiar and focused. Pavék, no longer a blundering, unclever templar, but a strong and brave man who fought with an obsidian trident. Blood no longer streamed from Pavék's face, but from

the Laq-sellers who lay in heaps at his feet. Zvain ran toward the fighter who would, surely, rescue him.

“Who am I!”

The question came from Pavek’s mouth and echoed off the walls. Zvain skidded to his knees. His savior was not Pavek, not a savior at all, but the mind-bender. And not wanting to see his own death reflected in Pavek’s familiar eyes, he tried to lower his head, but he’d been transfixed.

The false Pavek regarded him with undisguised disgust as he raised his trident. Zvain found enough strength to tremble and whimper. But the mind-bending imposter aimed the trident at himself and, laughing manically, thrust the tines into his own head. With razor-edged talons he slowly peeled Pavek’s face away from his skull—

No—Not his skull.

Unable to look away, Zvain gaped in horror as a gold-etched black mask appeared where the mind-bender’s face should have been. And, by King Hamanu’s infinitesimal mercy, he *knew* the patterns on that mask—

Elabon Escrissar: Templar of the High Bureau, interrogator, and King Hamanu’s favorite. A man more hated—and feared—on the streets of Urik than the sorcerer-king himself.

The interrogator’s mask was fully revealed; Pavek’s inside-out face hung in tatters from red and black talons that had replaced the vanished trident. The templar shock it once; the slashed parchment reformed itself, right-side out.

“Pavek. That misbegotten jozhal’s still got his nose where it doesn’t belong.”

The templar shook his talons a second time, and Pavek’s face floated away on an intangible wind. Then Elabon Escrissar turned toward him, and he would have vomited up his fear, if he’d been able to do anything at all. Laq was deadly, but Elabon Escrissar was worse, and the two together, as it seemed they were, was evil beyond measure.

“Don’t be afraid, Zvain. Your loyalty is commendable, for all that it was misplaced. You shall be rewarded—”

Sheer terror finally broke his paralysis when the talons were less than a handspan from his nose. He flopped onto his side and curled into a tight, quivering ball. His heart stopped when cool fingers caressed his cheek.

“There, there, Zvain. Don’t be afraid. Truly. When you fear the worst, it manifests before you; that is the mind’s nature. Banish your fears and be rewarded. Raise your head. Open your eyes.”

Slowly, unwillingly at first, he began to relax. His heart calmed, and the knotted muscles in his neck loosened. When his eyes opened, he looked upon a wise and kindly face, a face so pale it seemed to glow with its own gentle light.

“No,” Zvain whispered, trying to recall his fear and the slave-master’s true face.

Black talons traced a feather-gentle line across his cheek. He felt his skin open.

“Banish your fears. Accept what I show you as the truth.”

The talons were gone, replaced by soothing fingertips that sealed his wounds. Blood became tears.

“Pavek would not help you—Pavek did not love you.”

Elabon Escrissar gestured toward emptiness. It filled with a swarthy, stoop-shouldered human dressed in a dirty, sweat-stained yellow robe. The scars on Pavek’s face pulsed malignantly. His eyes squinted, and his lips twisted into a beastly sneer.

“He abandoned you, didn’t he? He consorted with your enemies, the Laq-sellers—”

The itinerant trio, as ugly and depraved as before, appeared around Pavek, bound to him by chains of congealed blood.

“And you thought he was your friend. My poor Zvain—you thought he would rescue you, protect you. But he betrayed you instead—”

A cool fingertip touched his tears, drying them, so he could see with perfect clarity.

“What can I give you for a reward, Zvain?”

“Vengeance.”

“That is not enough. What else do you want?”

“Magic.”

“They are yours. Take them.”

He felt parchment fingers touch his forehead, then withdraw.

“Take ashes and dust.”

The conducive substances appeared on the ground. He gathered a handful of each before rising to his feet. He could see the templar’s face—stern and vengeful now, but still glowing with inner wisdom—and Pavek’s—turning more bestial each time his scar throbbed—and the truth was very, very clear in his mind.

“Open your mouth. Speak the words on the tip of your tongue—”

He obeyed, willingly. Harsh syllables hung in the air. They summoned the dust from his right hand and the ash from his left. Pavek began to scream; his tongue lengthened and swelled grotesquely until it plugged his throat. The screaming stopped, but the tongue continued to grow as Pavek’s entire body was consumed by one of its lesser parts.

Completely enrapt by the horror and magic, Zvain watched as the slug-thing burst its yellow robes and writhed on the paving stones. It sprouted countless wormy fingers, each with a throbbing scar, a single Pavek-eye, and a silently shrieking Pavek-mouth. As the last of the dust and ash evaporated from his clenched hands, the Pavek-thing began to shrivel. The tiny eyes turned to ash, the open mouths filled with dust, and the wormy fingers shriveled into black splotches that spread and merged until what remained of Pavek resembled nothing so much as the tell-tale black, protruding tongue of a Laq-eater’s corpse.

Then that, too, crumbled and was borne away on the intangible wind.

“Vengeance...” the whispered word echoed against the walls of the deserted dyers’ plaza.

He opened his hands and stared at them a moment. He’d imagined vengeance would be gratifying; instead he was as empty as his hands.

“Will he serve?” an unexpected, unfamiliar voice said from behind his left shoulder.

Without thought Or hesitation, he turned toward the sound. He saw painted walls, draperies, and a wild-haired halfling. The halfling’s face had been brutally marked with slave-scars that seemed both old and unhealed. There was, however, nothing servile in the halfling’s posture or his voice when he repeated his question.

Zvain shook his head, unable to comprehend the question until he’d sorted out where he was from where he’d been.

“Oh, yes, Kakzim. Beyond our wildest dreams—”

This time the voice and face were familiar: the elegantly pale slave-master with taloned fingertips. Elabon Escrissar without his mask or the inner light of wisdom.

Were he not still sitting on the hassock, he would have collapsed as the pieces fell into place. He’d taken more than food and drink from the interrogator: he’d accepted magic.

Or the illusion of magic.

He’d destroyed Pavek in the theater of his mind, not reality and took a moment’s comfort from that—until he noticed the wall behind the interrogator. It was barren; the thick vines and cloying flowers were gone. Fearing the worst, he looked at the floor, where a thin layer of ash dulled the carpet.

It didn’t matter whether he’d killed Pavek in the dyers’ plaza or in his mind; he’d drawn real magic to do it. His greed for vengeance had consumed the life of Athas and left nothing in return. He’d become a defiler, irrevocably doomed and condemned by a single, thoughtless and futile act.

“—Zvain’s one of us, now.”

\* \* \*

Pavek had begun to run as soon as he saw the vast green-crowned grove on the horizon, and he'd run himself to exhaustion before he realized that no amount of racing would get him there. Gasping and feeling like an utter fool—again—he dropped to his knees. He could only wait, lapping up the sweat that fell from his face into his cupped hands, and wait for the cool wind from the center to blow again.

He was confident that it would. From what he'd seen so far, Telhami wouldn't miss the opportunity to mock him face-to-face in her grove. He didn't have to wait long. This time he followed the breeze obediently, even when it curled away from the grove, and set his foot on soft green grass when the sun was only a few handspans above the treetops. The druid's grove was alive with pattering sound. Pavek flinched left and right at each step before he observed water drops falling through the trees, striking leaves and branches before they dived into the grass. He'd heard or seen nothing like it before. Face up toward the trees, he stumbled through the gentle rain, paying more attention to the foliage than his feet.

"However did you survive as a templar in the lion's city?" He demonstrated his survival skills, bounding into the air like a startled erdlu, but landing, fists clenched and teeth bared, in a compact, wary crouch.

Telhami reclined on the far bank of a spring-fed stream. At least, he *assumed* it was Telhami. Quraite's chief druid had discarded her veil. The sunlight filtered through the trees revealed her as a woman no longer young, but hardly a withered crone. Prejudiced by a lifetime of dealing with templars, he took her relaxed presence and ironic tone as intimidation ploys and countered with insolence: immersing his face in the surprisingly cold water, as if it were something he'd done ten thousand times before.

"Yes, yes, Pavek. Take your time. You already know everything that I could teach you."

More intimidation, and successful this time—which left him that much more determined to conceal how decisively she'd stung him. He sauntered across the stream.

"I knew enough to get here, didn't I?" he asked as he sat. "You and Ruari thought I'd wander forever. Well, I followed your cool wind from the

center, and now I'm ready to be taught whatever it is that you have to teach."

Telhami responded with a solitary arched eyebrow. "You run a good race, Just-Plain Pavek, but you don't know how to win. It doesn't matter if you're growing trees or trying to get another scarlet thread for your sleeve—in the end it's not the power that matters, it's the will behind it. Here, as you noticed, power drips down from the trees. Hold out your hand and it flows over you, but can you catch it, Just-Plain Pavek? Can you speak its silent language? Can you bend it with your will?"

"That's what I'm here to be taught."

The druid flicked her hand, and a water-plume splattered his cheek. "I can't teach you how to wield your own will! What do you take me for—? Another sorcerer-king? An incubating dragon? I tell you: the spirit of Athas surrounds us. Speak to it. Bargain with it. *Invoke* it. Either you can do it, or you can't. Forget your scrolls. Start with light; that's the simplest spell. Make light, Just-Plain Pavek, while the sun still shines. Make water while it flows beside you. Call a bird or bee down from the treetops. You know the invocations. They're the same for a druid, a sun-cleric, or a Lion's templar—you did know that, didn't you, Just-Plain Pavek? So, make something happen. Something. Anything. Show me what you can do."

\* \* \*

Telhami sat back to watch and wait. She'd been prepared to wait several days; this stranger had done well to reach her grove the same afternoon he'd set out to find it. Though she'd decided, considering what he'd been, that she wouldn't add her voice to the cool wind. She'd done that for Yohan who, even so, had needed three days to find her grove his first time.

Yohan had dreamed of magic, like this youthful templar.

Yohan had tried his best, but not as dramatically as Pavek, who grunted, groaned, and knotted every muscle with his efforts. He put forth a

prodigious amount of sweat and tweaked the consciousness of Quraite's guardian spirit. It was not impressed and certainly not compelled, but it was aware.

Once a stranger roused the guardian—which Yohan had never done—she desperately wanted him or her to succeed. The price of failure here, where Quraite was strongest, was invariably death. If Pavek could not shape the guardian's will with his own, the ground would open around him and his corpse would join several dozen others shrouded in the myriad roots. And although that was a fate that served her purpose—adding lifeforce to Quraite-Telhami preferred to nurture Quraite with living druids rather than strangers' corpses.

On the other hand, Pavek was not the only disenfranchised templar wandering the Tablelands. The sullen broods of several city-states had been cut loose when their sorcerer-kings died or disappeared. Surely Pavek was not the only one who missed his borrowed power. She knew she'd sleep more easily if Pavek demonstrated that once a mind had become a conduit for a sorcerer-king's corruption, it could never master a more honest invocation of Quraite's guardian.

She sat patiently, hoping for one outcome, but willing to be satisfied with the other. Then Pavek, suddenly and unexpectedly, abandoned his efforts.

"It's impossible!" he explained with a disgusted snarl, tearing out a handful of grass and flinging it across the stream. "There's no silent voice for me to listen to. Not even that damned 'cool wind' of yours to follow. I know what I'm supposed to be looking for, and it's not there. You lied to me, old woman. Cheated and deceived me. You knew it couldn't be done, but you wanted to watch me burst apart trying. You wanted me to break my own spirit, to keep your own hands lily-clean. Well, I've seen your kind before: they're all over the templatate. And I've learned not to play your games. I won't make a fool of myself for your amusement. I quit instead!"

She could keep any emotion from shadowing her face, even the frustration she and the grove shared at that, moment. He'd come close. He'd come very close and brought the cup to his lips, but he had not sipped or

swallowed. And she did not know whether disenfranchised templars in general, or only this templar in particular, were incapable of druidry.

Of course, if all templars were quitters...

But she wasn't fool enough to think that. She sensed that Pavek's shortcomings were uniquely his own.

"You lack patience, persistence, and, most of all, you lack *faith* of any kind in me, in my grove, in *yourself*. I'm the one who's been cheated and deceived, Pavek. You said you wanted to learn; you lied. Find your own way, Just-Plain Pavek, if you dare."

She gathered up her hat and veil, though the sun was close to setting and its light wouldn't bother her eyes when she left the grove, left him here overnight. He was quite safe, unless he tried something destructive. And if he was foolish enough to do that, he deserved to spend eternity among the roots.

Pavek stiffened as she floated up from the ground. Fear was the dominant emotion on his face, and his thoughts were so focused on Ruari's exhortation: *Feed his bones to the trees, Grandmother*, that the half-elf's spiteful words echoed literally through the trees.

He shouted "Wait!" and without waiting to see if she heard or complied, squeezed his eyes shut.

Tilting her head to one side, listening to the guardian's surge as it honored an evocation, she sank back to the grass. Pavek hadn't suddenly acquired faith, but he was desperate, too desperate to think and, according to Akashia, this would-be druid was at his best when he wasn't thinking.

There was no grunting or straining this time, merely a prolonged exhalation that emptied his mind as well as his lungs. She leaned forward, holding her breath as the guardian stirred. There was an image visible on the surface of Pavek's mind: King Hamanu, the Lion of Urik, astride a mound of vanquished warriors with the severed head of one of them gripped in his upstretched hand.

Her blood froze: if Pavek summoned the sorcerer-king through Quraite's guardian spirit, they were doomed. She willed herself to intercede,

but Pavek held the guardian, and it resisted her.

She knew a moment of fear darker and deeper than any other in her life. She called on her own faith to sustain her, and then there was water.

Everywhere.

An otherworldly image of the Lion-King hovered above her spring, with water seeping from the wounds of the warriors beneath its feet. More water spouted from the mouth of the head he held in his hand. Water looped and spiraled and formed a swirling cloud around Pavek himself.

“A fountain!” she laughed, in genuine relief as water splashed her face. “You remembered a fountain! Water and stone together! Well done!”

Pavek’s fountain collapsed the instant her words penetrated his consciousness. He was drenched and dazed. For several moments he did not move at all. Her elation faded: a druid’s first invocation was the most dangerous, because the guardian must be released at its end. The more a neophyte druid invoked, the more dangerous the release. Pavek had invoked far more than the few splattering drops she’d expected, and there was a very real chance he’d invoked more than he could safely release. She held her breath, waiting for the ground to open and guardian to claim him.

Finally he blinked and raised his still-dripping hands.

“Water. My water.” He extended his arms toward her. “*My* water.”

She pressed her fingertips against his. It was an awesome personal accomplishment for a faithless man, and a chilling precedent.

“Yes,” she agreed solemnly. No need to share her doubts and concerns. “It’s a beginning, Pavek. The beginning of another race. Will you finish it? Can you win it?”

The innocent joy drained from his face.

“You can, Just-Plain Pavek,” she assured him, and herself, as she invoked Quraite’s guardian and rose above the grass. “Tomorrow. Here. Now, return home. Supper will be waiting for you.”

\* \* \*

The moons had set and his clothes were dry by the time Pavek returned to Quraite. He'd hoped Yohan was the silhouette squatting by the lone fire, but it was Ruari instead. The half-elf looked up as he approached. Ruari said nothing, and Pavek didn't either, once he saw his medallion hanging from the half-wit scum's neck.

## CHAPTER TEN

A summons slid into Akashia's dream some twenty nights after her return from Urik: a twinge of pain in a deep muscle, the unfocused scent of anxiety, the wind-borne words *Laq*, *templar*, and *Pavek*—all woven through a mind-sent image. Striding out of her solitary hut before she was completely awake and without the night-cloak folded beside the door, she was shivering by the time she reached the doorway of Telhami's hut.

A fist-sized oil lamp hanging from a crossbeam cast shadowy light through the single room. Telhami sat on a wicker bench, her eyes closed. She'd slumped, precariously pressed against the bark-covered center pole. Her head had fallen forward at an odd angle. For one horrifying moment, Akashia thought her friend and mentor had died.

"Grandmother?" Akashia couldn't make herself cross the threshold. "Grandmother..."

Telhami awakened with a shudder. Her eyes opened, and she stared at the doorway.

"Kashi? Kashi, what are you doing here in the middle of the night? Is something wrong?"

"You summoned me," Akashia whispered. "You were dreaming, Grandmother. You summoned me from your own dreams." Her voice grew louder, steadier as the situation became clearer.

Telhami shook her head, but her face grew thoughtful.

Akashia became convinced she saw things correctly: "You're worried about Pavek and Laq, aren't you, Grandmother? Confide in me, Grandmother. Tell me what troubles you. I brought him and his problems to Quraite. Let me help you deal with them."

"No." Telhami continued to shake her head. "It's nothing that serious, Kashi. Certainly nothing for you to worry about. Pavek strives hard, but learns slowly. It's frustrating for both of us, no worse than that. And Laq is a problem that will solve itself."

“How?”

“I don’t know—yet.”

Bracing herself against the bench and the center pole, Telhami pushed herself upright. She took an unsteady step, releasing the bench but keeping her other hand’s fingertips curled firmly on the rough bark for balance.

“But I will, Kashi. I will. It’s a matter of time and memory. A little more of each, and I’ll have the answer.”

“Not if you wear yourself out first.” She accepted the fundamental truth of Telhami’s assertion. Where Quraite’s guardian and Quraite’s history were concerned, she hadn’t learned much—she wasn’t ready to learn. But Pavek was another matter. “If the templar has told the truth about Laq, then Laq is the more serious problem. The templar himself is insignificant. Surely he didn’t learn anything in the Don’s archive that is more important than what the Lion’s minions are doing with our zarneeka. Let me teach Pavek in my grove for a few days, at least until you’ve found what you’re searching for. I’ve led the children through their catechism. I enjoy it, and you’d be free to do what only you can do.”

Telhami removed her hand from the pole. She stood straighter, and her eyes, when she turned around, were clear and bright. “Pavek is not a child, Kashi. Pavek is a man, a young man with a mind and strong thoughts of his own.”

“Grandmother, I’m not blind. I know exactly what Pavek is. I kenned him when he first told us his tale. His thoughts were strong, but there weren’t very many of them. His spirit isn’t dark, it’s empty. Scarred and empty. I could almost pity him, Grandmother, but no more than that.”

“Almost?”

She lowered her eyes. In Urik, she’d barely pierced the surface of Pavek’s mind when she kenned him for his basic character. Still, what she had encountered had both surprised and saddened her.

“You taught me that children are all innocent and full of potential, and that men and women are uniquely good or evil according to the sum of their deeds. But Pavek’s not like that. He’s not anything. His memory is filled

with terrible images, Grandmother. Evil images. But he's empty. He risked his life to tell us about Laq; he risked it again to save Ruari's. And yet he's empty. It's as if Pavek has the shape of a man, but the spirit of—of something broken. Something that never grew. The spirit of I don't know what."

"Of a templar," Telhami said gently.

Images of habit and prejudice swarmed her mind. Templars were brutal and malicious predators, savoring the agony they brought to less fortunate, less privileged folk. Ruari's father had been a templar—a rapist and murderer whose victims, Ghazala and Ruari, had survived. When she'd kenned Pavek, she'd seen a man who was more preyed upon than predator, more numb than brutal, and scarcely more fortunate or privileged than a beast of burden. "Not a templar."

Telhami's eyebrow arched. "Exactly a templar. Did you think they were all like Ruari's father?" She made a fire in a tiny hearth and filled a small pot with water.

"Yes. Yes, I suppose I did. I suppose I still do. Pavek was *different*, even that first time, when he wore a yellow robe. Did I tell you he fought with another templar over a human infant's life? I keep thinking he should be a good man, but he's not. He's just plain broken."

"I suspect all templars are broken. One way or another. They couldn't survive if they weren't. Some survive better than others, of course. I doubt Ruari's father was the worst to wear the yellow. But broken is as true a description as any. The pieces grind together when he invokes the guardian. Are you sure you want to take a broken man to your grove?"

"He can't harm me," she said, with less confidence than she'd intended. "If he forgets or tries, he'll be very sorry."

"And what about you? How sorry will you be, Kashi? How disappointed or betrayed?"

"Betrayed? Betrayed by what? I said I know he's not a good man. He's not even an attractive man. I know I brought him here, Grandmother, but I

don't particularly like him, and I certainly haven't lost my head or my heart to him."

"You're certain?"

"Of course I'm certain. Wind and fire, Grandmother, you're as bad as Ruari. Do you think I'd be blinded by the first stray man that stumbled across my path—and a *templar* at that?"

\* \* \*

Telhami threw tea into the pot. "No," she conceded, swirling the leaves, studying their patterns on the water.

Akashia hadn't been blinded by Pavek, but she was blind to her own beauty and to beauty's effect on the men around her. Not that Pavek seemed to be affected by beauty... or anything else. Beyond his determination to master spellcraft, Pavek seemed to have no other interests. His very doggedness blocked his progress; Quraite's guardian responded to livelier spirits'. Perhaps Akashia's notion was not so bad, after all. Kashi was good with beginners...

Then the image of a copper-haired youth stormed through her mind, all flashing eyes and scowls.

"There'd be trouble with Ruari," she admitted aloud.

"If there was going to be trouble with Ruari, it would have happened by now. He hasn't said anything since Pavek invoked the guardian. We all felt it. Ru wasn't happy, but he couldn't very well argue after that."

Fragrant steam rose from the pot, restoring her more thoroughly, more gently than her contact with the living pole of her hut. She was tired. Pavek's determination combined with his lack of progress made him an exhausting pupil. Moreover, Pavek slept soundly each night while she pondered the problems he'd brought out of Urik. Ruari might not argue with Quraite's guardian, but she did, every night.

The guardian didn't care about Urik or the aches and pains of common folk. When the guardian caught the drift of Laq, it was ready to destroy all

the zarneeka bushes in Quraite, and with them the sole source of Ral's Breath. Telhami believed there had to be a solution that did not punish the commoners. But she'd need the guardian's help to find it, and thus far that help had not been forthcoming.

She looked up from her tea and studied Akashia as she stood beside the center pole, apprehension and eagerness written on her face... and anger. Kashi said she'd been summoned; Telhami had no reason to doubt and—as the tea warmed her from the inside out—every reason to believe that her own deeper wisdom, working through her own dreams, had done the summoning.

“Take Pavek to your grove, Kashi. If that fails, put him to work in the fields.”

\* \* \*

A third of the night remained before the sun's red glow colored the eastern horizon and Pavek began his daily trek to Telhami's grove. Akashia had ample time to fetch her cloak from her hut, and with it secured around her shoulders, she settled on a hard bench in easy sight of the bachelor's hut.

By dawn, when the woven-reed door opened and Pavek stretched himself into the open air, she was chilled to the bone, despite her cloak, and consumed by doubts. Her voice failed when she first called his name, and it quavered the second time, too. He stopped short at the corner of the hut and stayed where he was, waiting for her rather than coming over.

“Telhami's resting today. I'm taking you to my grove instead.”

All her doubts and shivers hadn't prepared her for the slack-jawed frown that hung, suddenly from Pavek's face.

“You don't need to look so happy.”

“Is this your choice? If Telhami's tired—”

She cut him off with a wave of her hand. “I've held the door for other beginners; I can hold it for you.”

They left the village together, Akashia's progress through Quraite's mysteries didn't yet permit her to ride the guardian's power from one part of the oasis to another, as Telhami did. Curiosity overcame her reservations—she'd had few opportunities to talk with someone who lived inside the massive yellow walls of Urik, and none at all with anyone who'd lived a templar's life. She peppered him with questions that he answered with grunts and shrugs. In equal parts frustration and compassion, she let the one-sided conversation die. Pavek, who could have easily kept pace with her, fell a good fifteen steps behind and remained there until the rippling green meadow of her grove spread before them.

Watching from the corner of her eye, she waited for his reaction. Quraite's children most often bounded into the air, squealing with delight, or plunged face-first into the sweet-smelling wildflowers she nurtured. Pavek got a few paces into the waist-high grass and stopped cold.

"Where's the path? I don't know where I'm walking. I can't see my feet. I might step in the wrong place."

Not a child, Akashia thought ruefully, and not a man, either, but broken. "There is no wrong place, Pavek," she called, then added with a mischievous laugh: "Unless you make it wrong."

He chewed uncomfortably on that, and she came close to shame for teasing him. But this was her grove—her special place in all Athas—and being here filled her with a joy that banished everything else.

"Stop worrying! Open your eyes, your heart, and relax... Start moving!"

Pavek stayed where he was.

"Race me to the center!"

"Is that a command?" he demanded, fists resting on his hips. "A part of today's lesson?"

Broken. Just-Plain Pavek was definitely broken. The essence of druidry was wild and reckless, on the verge of danger, like the land itself. He'd never master it if he thought in terms of commands and obedience.

"Yes! The *only* lesson, if you can't catch me."

She was light-footed and began with a ten-pace lead, but she could hear the grass parting and snapping beneath his sandals as she entered the stand of trees she'd inherited from the grove's earlier druids. Elves were one thing; she knew she couldn't outrun an elf, or Ruari, for that matter. But a heavy-footed human male? It was embarrassing, and she leaned into the longest stride she could manage until she was a step short of her grove's bottomless pool. Then, taking a deep breath, she dived into the water, a mere—but significant-half-step ahead of him.

"You lose! No lessons today...!"

She expected Pavek to be in the water behind her, but he was bent over at the edge of the water, pale and panting.

"Water's deep. Can't swim."

Akashia pulled herself out of the pool. She sat on a rock, wringing water from her hair, berating herself for taunting Pavek. It was discourteous, and dangerous—even when she could call upon the guardian's power. And it would have been avoidable, if he'd been willing to answer any of her questions about life in Urik.

"No lesson?" he asked.

She began a damp braid before giving Pavek a narrow-eyed look. Sweat flowed down the ugly scar on his cheek, and his ribs still heaved. He hadn't even slaked his thirst. For all of *her* unfairness, there wasn't a trace of anger or outrage in his expression, only a hint of disappointment in the slope of his shoulders.

"Should I leave? I can find my way back to the village."

"Pavek! Don't leave. I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" His head tilted toward a rising shoulder. "Why be sorry? You made the game. You made the rules. You won. Druid lore is safe for another day. Don't worry—I'll be careful; I'll stay out of sight. Telhami won't know, unless you tell her." He started away from the pool.

The half-finished braid slipped through her fingers as she stood. She caught up with him under the trees.

“First lesson: There are no rules in druidry. It’s nature—all flow and change. Don’t be afraid to let go. And don’t leave; I *am* sorry.” She wanted to pat his arm. Quraiters touched each other when they were happy, sad, or anxious. But she hesitated before touching a templar.

Pavek shied away. “I don’t understand.” He sidestepped toward the village. “Magic is magic. I’ve read the scrolls; the spells are the same. There must be rules.”

“Come to the pool, I’ll show you.”

This time she didn’t hesitate. She wrapped her hands firmly around his wrist and dragged him to the pool like a stupid—stubborn erdlu.

“There are good ways and bad ways,” she explained, once she had him moving on his own. “Ways that usually work, and ways that usually don’t. You practice what’s reliable, but when push comes to shove, you do what you have to do.”

He stopped short, and they nearly collided. “Druidry’s like fighting?”

She frowned. “I hope not.” The thought that combat might be as free and formless as druidry was truly frightening. Before they started taking zarneeka to Urik, Yohan had taught her a few tricks of open hand fighting—in case they ran into trouble. She’d practiced the moves exactly the way Yohan taught them and had been confident that she was fully prepared for the unexpected. It hadn’t occurred to her, until now, that a true opponent might be unpredictable.

But what unnerved her proved helpful for Pavek who, as the warm Athasian morning became the longer, hotter Athasian afternoon, had some small success with the simple mnemonics and invocations she suggested to him. He was not a difficult student—not argumentative, like Ruari, who wanted to try his own ways before he mastered the tried and true methods, or uncertain, like most other youngsters. Just-Plain Pavek was just plain exhausting.

Failure didn’t daunt him. Even when he failed ten or twenty times in succession, he’d simply shake his head to clear it, close his eyes, raise his hands, and be ready for another attempt.

Sweat-stained and trembling, she called a halt while the sun was still well above the treetops. Pavek was disappointed, saying his lessons in Telhami's grove lasted until the sky was as red as the sun. But Grandmother insisted that her pupils do everything for themselves, while she subscribed to gentler theories of education, pressing her hands against his each time he attempted an invocation, rough-shaping the guardian's primal energies before they reached him.

Today Pavek had summoned spheres of water and fire and called a timid songbird down from the trees. Today he wanted to practice until the moons rose.

She threw up her hands. "Enough! Let's save something for tomorrow."

He grinned, the first she'd seen. He'd never be handsome—he looked better with a beard but he preferred to go clean-shaven—but a smile took the menace out of his face and balanced it nicely. It vanished the moment she invited him into the pool. Wild water, no matter how sweet or cold, apparently didn't tempt the city dweller, especially when he couldn't see the bottom of it.

He sat in the grass with his back to the water until she was thoroughly refreshed, then they headed back to the village, walking side-by-side. This time he answered her questions about Urik and asked a few of his own, mostly about druidry. They saw smoke rising from cookfires while they were still in the scrubland between the grove and the village. Succulent and spicy aromas met them on the footpaths through the garden fields. Recognizing them all, she stopped talking and began to run. Pavek kept pace, and she stole a sidelong glance to see if he looked as hungry as she felt. He didn't; that vaguely sullen, menacing mask of disinterest he wore most of the time had clamped down over his face again. , The first person she saw in the village was Ruari, crouched on the porch of a pantry hut, frantically scouring a wooden bowl. She assumed he'd taken extra food to his grove and was now destroying the evidence. The druids, who did not work in the gardens, weren't supposed to take more than their fair share from the pantries, but Ru was always finding orphaned kivit kittens and sheltering them in his grove until they could fend for themselves. It was one

of his better habits, and all the mote endearing because he tried so hard to conceal it, lest anyone think he was tender-hearted or soft-headed, or a half-elf.

His mix of human and elven inheritance gave him a special rapport with animals, as if Athas itself understood that lonely, misunderstood half-elves would need the friendship only a loyal animal companion could provide. Ru loved animals, and they, by in large, loved him. But he kept his friends hidden in his grove where visitors were never welcome.

Since Pavek's arrival, very little food had vanished from the pantries. She knew she wouldn't be the only one who was glad to see Ruari pilfering again. After telling Pavek to go ahead, she called her friend's name and left the path.

Ruari's head came up—slack jawed and white eyed, caught squarely in an act of compassion. She smiled to reassure him and got a glower of purest malice as a reply. Then, with the bowl in one hand and a clump of scrubbing thorns in the other, he darted out of sight behind another hut.

"I won't *tell* anyone," she protested, but he remained in hiding and, after another futile effort, she went on her own way to supper.

The men and women preparing the evening meal hailed her at once, asking her if she'd brought anything special for the pots from her grove. She hadn't. She'd forgotten completely—Pavek's lessons had driven everything else from her mind. So she offered to stir one of the pots instead. But Telhami, standing straighter and stronger after a day of rest, called her over.

They were still discussing Pavek's progress, or the lack of it, on the porch of Telhami's hut when the supper-horn sounded.

Day and night, Quraiters went about their own business. They came together as a community only for the evening meal. The hard-packed dirt around the cookfires echoed laughter and gossip as neighbors shared the events of their day with each other. Akashia and Telhami shared in the daily greetings, but ate apart from the rest, continuing their conversation.

From the corner of her eye, Akashia caught Ruari emerging from his hiding place. He took his place with a handful of age-mates—the same youths she herself had played and worked with until Telhami singled her out for special instruction. Ruari ate with them, but he didn't look at or talk to anyone.

Pavek was the last to enter the commons, the last to pick up a bowl. The servers had gone to eat their own meals, abandoning their ladles on the pot rims. The templar served himself, his custom and his choice, made at his first Quraite supper and continued without exception since that night. He ate quickly, standing up and completely by himself. As soon as the last drop of stew had been sopped up with the last morsel of bread, he cleaned his bowl and returned it to a large basket by the well.

He left the commons, headed for the fallow fields, where, according to Yohan who kept an eye on him when he was in the village and made regular reports to Telhami, he would sit by himself, recreating his memorized spellcraft in the dust with a piece of straw.

“What will become of him, Grandmother?” she asked, though she knew there were only two alternatives: he would master their spellcraft and become a druid, or he would become a farmer, as all other Quraiters were farmers. She refused to consider the third alternative: that he would wind up in the roots of Telhami's grove.

“Too soon to say.”

While other Quraiters relaxed into a twilight of song and storytelling around a crackling fire, Akashia remained on the porch. The greatest of Quraite's mysteries did not reside in any ancient grove or in the guardian's mystic presence; they resided in Telhami's keen understanding of the forces that shaped the Tablelands. And so Akashia sat, listened, and learned another lesson about the movements of the moons and the winds, of seeds, oil, metal, and salt, and every other thing upon which their lives depended.

Pale Ral, the smaller moon, rose above the trees to begin its journey through the stars. Ral was solitary this evening, Guthay was resting with the sun. The heat of day gave way to the chill of evening and the fireside gathering dispersed, singly and in pairs and families. She would have gone

with them if she could. Her day had begun earlier than usual, and she hadn't had Grandmother's advantage of an afternoon nap, but Telhami was talking about salt and gave no sign of tiring. So she waved to friends who walked past, and tried to stay awake.

Her eyes were still open but her thoughts had wandered into dreams when someone shouted their names. A moment passed while she collected her wits. By then Telhami had vanished, using the guardian's energy to travel instantaneously to the problem. She had to wait until a boy skidded to a stop in front of her.

"It's the templar," the child said breathlessly. "He's dying. Grandmother says, bring her herbs, and hurry."

Surprisingly and inexplicably numb from heart to fingertips, she collected a handful of thong-wrapped pouches. The boy led her beyond the trees where Pavek's moans were a better guide than the boy.

"What's happened?" she asked, although Pavek's pain-contorted body told an eloquent tale.

"Poisoned himself," Telhami muttered, taking two of the pouches from her hand.

"Poisoned himself?"

She would have sworn to anyone, including the guardian of Quraite, that Pavek had been in the best of spirits when they returned from her grove. He'd shaped the elements with only a little help from her; his belief that he would master druidry had been restored. He'd smiled, and even laughed—as if he were made of the same emotional stuff as other men. "He had no cause to poison himself," she concluded, trying to assure herself as much as Telhami and the other shadows beneath the trees.

"Poison," Telhami repeated, and this time, as a black froth bubbled through Pavek's lips, there could be no further doubt.

She cradled his head in her lap and forced his mouth open enough for Telhami to dust his tongue with herbs. His eyes rolled white, his back cracked like a whip, and he writhed loose. A moan erupted deep in his gut,

and he began to retch up a foul-smelling, viscous fluid that shimmered briefly before turning dark and dead.

The herbs confirmed the diagnosis, nothing more. Telhami turned toward the shadows—

“Yohan?”

“Nothing, Grandmother,” he said wearily. “Whatever he ate, he ate it to the last crumb and drop, or he didn’t eat it here in the village.”

“He ate supper with the rest of us,” another shadow interjected, going soft and slow at the end. “We all ate what he ate.”

No one said anything for a moment, while Pavek, no longer vomiting, pressed his fists into his gut and curled around them. He was conscious, after a fashion, muttering names between his moans: Dovanne, Rokka, Escrissar. But he was unaware of his immediate surroundings. Of Telhami or Yohan... of her as she once again tried to shield his head.

“That won’t help,” Telhami chided. “Give me your hands.”

Obediently, because Telhami was right, she raised her hands, palms-out, above Pavek’s chest. As Ruari had channeled the lifeforce of Athas for her when she wrought healer’s spellcraft on the injured kank, she took the second’s role for Telhami. Here in Quraite, where the guardian’s presence was concentrated, she surrendered herself completely to its power.

Other druids worked their magic in different ways. Other clerics certainly did. But in Quraite where Telhami had learned druidry and where her way was now the only way, one druid channeled the lifeforce and a second invoked the spell whenever it was possible. She heard the first droning syllable of the invocation; her flesh grew warm. She heard the second; her hands burned as if her fingers had become flames. Then nothing, heard or felt, as Telhami took what she offered and fought for Pavek’s life.

Time passed without measure or mark. The healing fire was quenched. She yawned and stretched, no worse for her experience, and looked down on Pavek, stretched out between her knees and Telhami’s. His limbs were relaxed, but not limp. His chest rose in a deep, regular rhythm and, in the

hollow of his throat, four dark beads the size of a jozhal's eye glistened in the moonlight.

Cautiously Telhami touched one bead with a moistened finger, then pressed the tip against her tongue.

“Kivit.”

Kivits excreted an effective poison through musk glands beneath their cheeks. They spread the ooze across their fur as they groomed themselves. The defensive coating made the little creatures an unappetizing mouthful to any but the most desperate predator. Quraite's farmers smeared kivit musk around the trunks of their trees while the fruits budded and ripened. It killed any field vermin that ventured across it, but a man was in no danger, unless he gorged himself on kivit, fur and all—at best an unlikely possibility—or he mistook a sun-dried clot of concentrated musk for a date or raisin—a mistake he should have corrected the moment his mouth puckered.

Her thoughts raced toward a dreaded conclusion: Ruari collected kivits in his grove. Ruari collected and dried kivit musk for the farmers. Ruari had run away when she'd caught him scrubbing a bowl.

Not cleaning it. Not so innocent, but lining the bowl with poison.

It could be done. Pavek had made himself predictable, vulnerable. He came late, took the last bowl, and served himself. He'd never complain if the stew tasted strange, never suspect that his was different. And he'd use a sponge-like chunk of bread to mop up every last morsel and drop from the bowl's sides. Every last morsel and drop of poison, too.

“Kashi?”

Telhami interrupted her down-spiraling thoughts. She met the sharp, ancient eyes with a shiver. It didn't matter what Pavek was, who he'd been, or what he might become. What Ruari had done would be Ruari's death once Grandmother knew about it.

“Kashi?”

“It's nothing,” she lied and, knowing that lie would not be sufficient, added: “I'm a fine one to chide you about wearing yourself out with Pavek.

One day guiding him through his lessons, and I'm so exhausted I can't see straight."

Lying was frowned upon in Quraite, but it was not a capital offense, and she congratulated herself that she'd been able to come up with a good lie so easily. With a heartbeat's effort, she could even convince herself that the guardian understood and approved.

"You young folk need more sleep than I," Telhami agreed. "Danger's passed here. Go on, take yourself to bed. Pavek will tell us what happened when he wakes up tomorrow morning—"

*That* had the ring of certainty to it—and all the more reason for her to find Ruari first. She rose unsteadily. No lying there: her muscles were cramped from kneeling on the chilled ground. The healing had lasted longer than she'd imagined.

"Until morning," she whispered, careful to retreat toward her own hut, and getting well beyond the torchlight around Pavek before beginning her search.

Ruari might have retreated to his grove. He might have left Quraite entirely—which was what she was going to tell him to do in no uncertain terms. But Ruari hadn't inherited a grove. His tiny plot of nurtured ground was as far from the center of Quraite as it could be while remaining under the guardian's purview. She'd search there last, just before she'd decide that he'd left Quraite forever. First there was the bachelor hut, where he usually slept and where a finger hooked through the reed walls revealed Ruari's undisturbed blankets folded along the wall among a half-dozen snoring men.

Next the pantry hut where the bowl-filled basket was in its usual place and filled with its usual jumble—impossible to discern if one half-elf had removed one telltale bowl. Then, to the porch of the hut where she'd seen him scrubbing the bowl before supper, but which was deserted now. And, finally, to the place where he'd hidden himself earlier.

He sat there, cross-legged in the shadows, waiting to be caught with the incriminating bowl squarely in his lap.

“Why, Ru? Why?”

He hadn’t heard her coming, hadn’t expected *her* at all. The bowl bounced in the dusty dirt as he scrambled to his feet, looking right and left—as if he might run—before standing still, looking at his feet.

“Someone had to. He didn’t belong here. Never could, never would. I kept waiting. Every day I waited for Grandmother to say he wouldn’t be coming back, that the guardian and her grove had taken him—”

“So you decided you’d be the guardian instead?”

He didn’t answer, only twisted the hem of his tunic around his forefinger until the entire garment was tight across his chest and he looked a larger version of the boy Ghazala had abandoned years ago. But this time there could be no taking him in her arms or drying his tears.

“No one has the guardian’s rights. It’s murder, Ru. Pure, simple, and planned. Murder, not justice—”

“*He* was the real poison!” Ruari sputtered, barely in control of his rage and fear. “It was bad enough when Grandmother took him to her grove, *every day*. I thought... I thought maybe, maybe she was peeling his mind back, extracting his templar secrets before she put him in the ground. But today... Kashi, you took him to your grove. All day. Wind and fire, Kashi—a *templar*! I asked myself: what were you thinking—and I knew the answer: He’d poisoned Grandmother’s mind and yours. He was making you do foolish things—”

“You’re the fool, Ru.”

“Pyreen protect us if I’m the fool, Kashi.” Ruari’s voice was low and even. Rage had gotten the upper hand in his emotions, and despite herself, she took a step backward. “I saw you coming back today: all talking, all smiles, your hair all damp, your dress. I saw it, Kashi. The only thing I regret is that I waited a day too long to kill him!”

It came to her then, with the suddenness of lightning, that Ruari was jealous. He cared for her, not as she cared for him—a tag-along orphan, a temperamental younger brother who needed an older sister’s unquestioning

affection until he learned the manners to return it—but in the way Telhami had feared she'd cared for Pavek.

If the air hadn't been so charged with betrayal, she would have laughed. Even so, she couldn't keep a smile from ghosting across her face as she reached for his arm. "Pavek hasn't poisoned my mind, Ru. And there's nothing—nothing at all—between us. He's afraid of the water, afraid of the grass, can hardly smile or laugh. He's just a man completely out of his element. Just—" She caught herself before she completed her thought, completed the comparison her mind had accidentally made between a hapless, sullen Pavek standing at the edge of her pool and Ruari himself not many years ago.

"Just what?" he demanded, an ugly sneer curling his lips. "Just another raping, murdering, yellow-robe templar! I'm glad he's dead, hear me. I'll swear an oath in Grandmother's grove. I'm not afraid: I killed him and I'm glad. I'll show the guardian what's in my mind: the way he looks at me —'cause I'm wise to his templar games, the way he looked at you when we were in Urik, the way he looked at you today—"

"The way—" Akashia began to say The way he saved your life in the storm, but that would only feeding a futile argument. "Pavek's *not* dead," she said instead. "We saved him, Grandmother and I—"

Ruari lashed out with his fist, freeing himself from her hand and striking her across the chin in the same movement. She'd never been hit before, never in anger. The pain lasted an instant; the shock echoed in the depths of her being. Her hands flew to her face—all Yohan's self-defense instructions forgotten.

"Why? Why, if he's nothing to you?"

Ruari's fist rose to shoulder level, but whether for another blow or mindlessly, as her own hands had risen, no one would ever know. A muscular shape surged between them: Yohan coming to her rescue. Yohan, who'd followed her as he followed Pavek, on Telhami's orders. Yohan who had, undoubtedly, heard everything. He easily lifted the half-elf and hurled him against the nearest hut, where he slid to the ground and held still: eyes

open, conscious, thinking, scared. The dwarf folded his massive arms over his barrel-ribbed chest, fairly daring Ruari to move.

“You’ve got to leave, now,” she pleaded. “You’ve crossed the line. Go—before it’s too late. Leave. Pavek’s alive; no one will stop you. The guardian won’t stop you. But you *intended* murder. You can’t stay here any longer. Renounce your grove, Ru—it’s the only way.”

“Renounce it... so a damned templar can trample through it?” Ruari challenged, defiant even in defeat.

The sound of stumbling and staggering intruded before she shaped an answer. Yohan raised a finger to his lips and dropped into a crouch. Another few heavy, flat-footed steps and a seedy-looking Pavek was among them.

“Trample through what?” he demanded, steadying himself against the wall above Ruari’s head, looking down and making it clear that only Ruari could give him a satisfactory answer.

Which Ruari would not do.

“This is no concern of yours, Pavek,” she said into the lengthening silence, trying to sound confident and in command. “Ruari’s done wrong. He—he’s the one who tried to murder you with poison. He’s got to leave Quraite. He’s got to leave now, before—”

“Before Telhami starts asking questions?” Pavek asked—seedy or not, he was the one in command of the situation. Grandmother must have suspected Ruari and shared her suspicions with her patient. Yohan, apparently, approved, because he straightened his legs and folded his arms over his chest again.

“Druids don’t murder,” she said, feeling that she was the one under attack. “Quraite doesn’t shelter murderers. The guardian won’t tolerate it.”

Pavek shrugged. “That’s for your guardian to decide, isn’t it? If there was a murder, I wouldn’t be standing here, would I? If there’d been murder done tonight...”

“He meant to murder you. It’s the same thing.”

The ex-templar smiled, a cold and frightening smile. “Not where I come from. Seems to me a *druid* wouldn’t make foolish mistakes measuring

out his poisons. If some druid wanted me dead, some druid would have used enough poison so some other druid couldn't haul me back from death's door long before it swung shut. Some half-wit druid, with a grove where everyone knew he kept kivits and collected their musk, couldn't have been so foolish. So, some half-wit druid must have known what he was doing, must have been sending me a warning. That's what I think. That's what I'd swear—"

"Mind your words," Yohan interjected, deep-throated and meaningful.

"That's what I'd swear before a Urik court. My word against his. My warning against his murder. And my word would prevail, because there's been warning, but no murder. In Urik, by King Hamanu's infinitesimal mercy, what a man *does* is all that matters. What he thinks is spit in the wind—or every man, woman, and child would die each sundown for what he'd *intended* to do each sunrise. It's a sorry state, I think, when the Beast of Urik has more mercy than a Quraite druid."

Akashia laced her fingers together. She could see now, for the first time, what Ruari saw when he looked at that scarred face, and she couldn't imagine why Grandmother had shared her suspicions with him, as she must have done.

Pavek was shaking. Vomit stained his tunic; the stench reached her nostrils five paces away. He was crude and disgusting, and he wore both traits like armor. Pavek was broken, all right. He was a templar to the very bone.

And, once again, this templar was giving Ruari's life back to him.

"Ru—?"

The coppery face swiveled up toward Pavek, not her. "I *intended* murder. My only mistake was that I failed."

"Your word against mine, scum," Pavek replied, as cold as a human voice could be. "I heard a warning. You won't get a second chance."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The ground between the guarded Quraite groves was as hard as any of Urik's cobblestone streets. Pavek's sandals made a reassuringly familiar sound as he walked) quick-pace, toward the distant stand of tall trees that was Telhami's grove. He was grateful for the cool wind that continued to blow from that grove—or Akashia's grove when he was determined to go *there*, the two druids having decided that they would conduct his lessons on alternating days—but he no longer relied upon the wind to guide him.

Hard as the ground was, generations of druid feet marching from village to grove and back again had left their mark on it. With nothing better to do as he walked, he'd learned to see the difference in color and texture that defined a path through the wilderness. He could even distinguish the more subtle distinctions that marked the lesser paths between the groves themselves. His lessons hadn't progressed beyond tiny, fast-evaporating spheres of conjured water or fire spells that were more smoke than flame, but he'd begun to build himself a map of Quraite in his mind: the village at the absolute center, surrounded by its cultivated fields and the wilderness between the village and the Sun's Fist, which was studded with groves—at least twenty of them, if he'd correctly identified the high-rank, grove-tending druids at supper.

And he'd done it all without asking questions. Some habits were harder to break than others. Pavek was getting used to the looser routines of Quraite life. He no longer flinched when someone greeted him with a smile. But he was still a templar in his heart, and templars didn't ask unnecessary questions because answers, especially honest answers, created debts.

Which was why, though he progressed toward his goal of druid mastery in a day with Akashia—there had been another pair of them since that first day when she'd challenged him to a race through her blind-grass meadow—he preferred a day in Telhami's grove. The old woman seldom asked questions, never personal ones, but Akashia, try as she might, couldn't contain her curiosity about the city, about templar life, about his own life,

and—worst of all—about the differences between the lessons she gave him and those he received from Telhami.

As if a low-rank templar would ever venture an opinion about one superior to another!

Of course, both women insisted there was no hierarchy in Quraite. Share and share alike, they said. Speak your mind, they said: We value your thoughts, Pavek. Don't hesitate to tell us what you think.

Did they think he was a gith's-thumb fool? He could see that everyone bowed and scraped at Telhami's feet. They smiled and called her Grandmother, and she smiled back and said thank-you...

All very polite and civil.

Hamanu's infinitesimal mercy! He'd seen a hundred Urik festivals where children laid bouquets of flowers at the sorcerer-king's feet, and *he* smiled, and *he* said thank-you, and no one had a moment's delusion where the power lay or who had the will to use it, politely, civilly, and utterly without remorse or conscience.

Day after day they told him to send his mind into Quraite's heart, seeking the guardian. Did they think he hadn't found the bones beneath the trees? Did they think he hadn't guessed the fate of those who'd tried and failed?

Don't hesitate to tell us what you think, they said.

It would have to rain for a hundred days and a hundred nights before he'd stick his head into *that* trap. A thousand days!

Or so he vowed to himself as he marched across the hard ground.

They were getting to him, these druids with their open, smiling, unscarred faces. He had to ask himself if there weren't other reasons he preferred the days when Telhami was his instructor, and the answers chilled him to the marrow. Akashia was Telhami's special pet, her designated successor, and already—as a veteran of the civil bureau measured these things—the next-most-powerful druid in the community. She wasn't like anyone he'd met before: honest, fair, *curious*, and as well-tempered as his knife's steel blade.

All Quraite loved her, but no one loved her more than Ruari—to which she, for all her bright curiosity, seemed oblivious. He wasn't. He'd eavesdropped on his neighbors' conversations at supper, learning bits and pieces of the half-elf's story. If their paths had crossed—if he hadn't been a boy himself when it happened—he'd've killed the templar who ravished the boy's mother; he'd done as much for the beast who ravished Dovanne and for the same simple reason he'd kill vermin or Elabon Escrissar: They were diseased and had to be eliminated before their disease spread.

It had already spread to Ruari. The half-wit scum saw the world through his scars, real and imagined; there was no use talking to him or trying to make peace. No matter what Akashia hoped or said—and she'd said more than Pavek wanted to hear, blind as she was to Ruari's adoration—they couldn't be brothers to each other. She saw herself as the boy's sister.

Everybody was blind to something. Akashia was blind to Ruari.

But leave him and the scum alone and they might be able to steer clear of each other. He knew he'd be content to ignore Ruari—but for the poison. He'd known exactly what he was doing when he confronted them; would have figured it out without Telhami's help, though not so quickly.

His gut still ached. Whether from the poison itself or the healing afterward he couldn't be sure—he didn't ask questions. The sight of food still made him nauseous, and he had to stop now and again as he walked to catch his breath.

Once the sun came up, as it had a short while ago, the only useful shade between the village and the groves came from the brim of a borrowed straw hat. There was no point to leaving the path to rest; when he got tired, he just sat down where he was, back to the east, where the sun was climbing, and making the most of what the hat and his shoulders gave him. With his eyes closed and his mind as empty as only a veteran templar could make it, he waited for his pulse and gut to settle.

They did, and before the hat got hot enough to burst into flames. He rubbed his eyes, got to his feet and, because he was a templar and was accustomed to having enemies, spun slowly on his heels, scanning his

surroundings for anything that didn't belong. Nothing man-shaped—Ruari-shaped—had appeared, but there was something new, something to make him squint into the shimmering heat-bands along the southern horizon, the Urik horizon.

A fist-sized dust plume billowed there, raised—if he could believe his eyes—by a horde of black dots beneath it.

His first self-centered thought put Elabon Escrissar's name on one of those fast-moving dots, and he'd started back toward the village before common sense regained a foothold in his mind. He *knew* the whole story of Quraite, zameeka, Ral's Breath, and Laq, and how he, himself, had gotten bound up in it. But, there was no reason—no reason at all—for anyone in Urik to think a third-rank templar with a forty-gold-piece price on his head had found refuge at a distant druid oasis. There was no reason to think anyone in Urik knew Quraite's name and every reason to believe that Telhami and the guardian kept its precise location a well-secured secret.

So he turned about-face, retraced a hundred paces, and stopped again.

*Something* was on the salt plain. Maybe it would skirt the guarded land; he wasn't at all certain how Quraite's protective magic worked. But, maybe it wouldn't. Maybe the druids would know the instant a stranger set foot in their, private wilderness. But, maybe they wouldn't. There were trees everywhere, trees as high as the walls of Urik, without battlements and watchtowers.

Regulators patrolled the Urik walls sometimes, when King Hamanu dragged the war bureau off on campaign. It was light duty with clear-cut orders: Report what you see, within the walls or outside them. Do your duty and let superiors make the decisions.

Pavek spun around again and headed for the village.

The broad green crown of village trees loomed in front of him, distinct from the dust plume, which had not grown noticeably. Another black dot had appeared between him and the village. It was moving, growing, coming toward him, resolving itself into a dwarf's stocky silhouette.

Yohan, and immensely relieved that he wasn't going to have to trek all the way to Telhami's grove to deliver his message. The dwarf spoke first: "The elves are coming, they'll be here by midday. Grandmother and the others are waiting for them in the village. No lessons today."

"Elves?" Pavek stared at the dust cloud, asking himself if that was what he saw.

"Moonracers. The whole tribe of them, and their herd. And a barrel or two of honey-ale."

The dwarf came close and clapped him across the back, as casual a gesture as they'd exchanged, but his thoughts were still on the elves.

"Moonracers—Ruari's kin, aren't they? Trouble?"

Yohan let his arm fall. "Maybe," he conceded. "You've seen him at his worst, Pavek. His age and his breed, they take things too hard, too personally. Ghazala didn't have a choice, not really. Moonracers—they're a fast-moving lot, no place for outsiders who can't keep the pace."

"Or remind them of things they'd rather forget?"

"That, too." Yohan cupped a hand around his beardless chin and shook his head. "The boy doesn't understand. When the Moonracers show up, he's all strut and brawl to prove that he's as good as any elf. When they're gone, he seems happy enough here—"

"Not since I heaved into sight," Pavek corrected.

"Aye, well—" The dwarf shrugged. Muscles rippled across his bare shoulders and chest. "Their honey-ale's as good as you'd find in Urik, and maybe the boy will sulk in his grove 'til they're gone."

Pavek didn't know about honey-ale; it wasn't the sort of rotgut Joat stocked in his Den, but where Ruari was concerned, he expected trouble rather than a sulking absence. He kept those expectations to himself, naturally, and fell in step beside Yohan. The dwarf's preferred pace, a bit slower than his own, got them to the village as the Moonrace fore-runners arrived, dusted with salt from their run across the place, but otherwise unsweated and full of breath.

The Quraite farmers were wrestling a stake-and-rope perimeter around the village's fields to protect their crops from the Moonracers' kanks. There was no point in asking the elves to confine their herd. Freedom was a virtue among elves second only to friendship. If Quraite valued Moonracer friendship, it was the farmers' chore to enclose the tender green plants.

Yohan grabbed a rock-headed maul and started hammering stakes into the ground. The stakes, with a burnt opening at one end for the rope and a dirt-caked point at the other—this was clearly not the first time Quraite had hurriedly defended its ripening fields—were bound into easily managed bundles. Pavek hesitated a moment, waiting for someone to tell him to do the obvious, then picked up two bundles and a maul.

Ropes had been threaded through the stakes and knotted tight by the time the heart of the tribe and its herd settled down on the scrubland beyond the village. Tall, elven women and their loose-limbed children visited the wells to replenish their water jugs—always the first and most important task at any encampment. Other elves traded bright-colored cloth and metalware for Quraite's surplus fruits, vegetables, and grain.

For his part, Pavek followed Yohan and the others who had worked up a thirst protecting the fields. They entered the elven camp where, as the dwarf had promised, a barrel of honey-ale had been broached.

And while the Moonrace tribe would not confine their herd nor stoop to farmers' labor, they understood the virtue of compromise well enough to offer the Quraiters as much ale as they cared to drink. Pavek drained his first mug between breaths. The sweet, amber-colored brew slid easily down his throat and shot into his blood. He got a second mug and, sipping it slowly, walked away from the barrel.

Pavek had lived without many possessions, first in the templar orphanage, then the barracks, and now the bachelor's hut. The traders offered little that tempted him, and anyway, he had nothing to offer the elves in return, like his templar medallion, the few coins he'd slung from his belt the day he left Urik hadn't been returned to him. Since Ruari had the medallion, he assumed the half-wit scum had his coins, as well. More from idle curiosity than any desire to feel the weight of his small wealth

against his leg again, he glanced among the traders, looking for that unmistakable coppery hair.

He spotted it, too, but not among the traders. Much as Yohan had predicted, Ruari had joined his elven age-mates in their constant games of skill and daring. At least, that was what Ruari was trying to do. Tall and lithe among the Quraiters, Ruari showed his human blood against his Moonrace kin. As Pavek watched, he lost both a footrace and a barrel-leaping contest. The victorious elves made no secret of their contempt for a slow, clumsy, outcast relative and would-be elf.

The elves ridiculed Ruari mercilessly. The scum issued brash challenges he couldn't hope to carry through. Remembering his lesser moments, when he'd joined in the torment of those orphans who did not survive to become templars, he hoped Ruari would have sense enough to back down before the mockery turned physical—though a half-elf would have the edge, if it came to brawling.

Elves were lousy wrestlers, no match for a well-made fist. They took more than their share of bruises and broken bones on the practice fields where he'd trained with and against every Tableland's race. A templar's training was as thorough as his enemies were numerous; it had to be. From where Pavek stood, he could see any number of ways he, a heavy-set human, could have bested the boasting elves. Even a few that didn't resort to cheating. With his nearly full mug of ale clutched in his fist, he found a piece of shade with a view not only of Ruari's hapless struggle, but of most of the village as well. The Moonrace elders with their piercing eyes and wind-carved faces had begun to assemble near the central well. Akashia, Yohan, and several others, including several Pavek had marked as farmers, not druids, appeared with platters of Quraite's finest fruit.

The offering was accepted and, following Akashia, the tribal patriarch led the way into Telhami's hut. Pavek considered moving closer. The memory of Rokka slipping a handful of gold coins into a salt sack at the customhouse had flitted across his mind's eye. He wondered what the Moonracers might offer in trade for gold. They had the look of true nomads who ranged over the entire Tablelands, not merely the environs of a single

city-state. The sort of elves—truth to tell—that made Urik’s templars nervous when their flags appeared in the elven market, selling their knowledge of the outside world along with ordinary contraband.

Then he added the thought of Escrissar’s threat to spread Laq to the other city-states, and he did move closer to the hut, only to find himself in a stand-off with an elf with a metal-tipped spear half again her height.

“You’re new here,” she said, narrowing her eyes and turning the statement into an insult.

Elves had very keen eyes and memories for outsiders. Pavék didn’t bother answering. Or sticking around. He retreated to the edge of village, where the young elves and Ruari had also retreated, now that their competition had expanded to include javelin-hurling and an acrobatic contest in which two youths ran full-tilt at each other until one dropped to his knees and the other attempted to avoid a collision by leaping over his shoulders. Once again, Ruari played the loser’s part, always trying leap when he should have ducked.

Everybody had a blind spot. Ruari’s futile ambition to *be* an elf blinded him to the strengths he did possess. If he’d stuck one hand up while he was bent over and grabbed an elven ankle as it soared overhead, he’d’ve had one bruised elf who wasn’t going to leap or run for a while.

A half-elf had the strength, and Ruari’s escapade with the kivit musk demonstrated that he had the necessary malice. But if there’d been a tout standing near to make the odds, Pavék would’ve bet that Ruari would continue to leap and fall until his face was a bloody pulp. He’d seen it on the practice fields, when a templar grew too attached to some exotic weapon or style and ignored the simple things that would keep him alive.

Sometimes people were only interested in what they couldn’t have: a flashy obsidian sword instead of a serviceable flint-studded club. A graceful, acrobatic leap instead of a ground-hugging tuck-and-roll...

Druidry instead of something simpler, something for which he was better-suited?

Yohan was in Telhami's hut, making decisions, so were some of the peasant farmers. A man could be important here even if he wasn't a druid. If he'd wanted to be important. But Pavek *wanted* spellcraft. Whether it was in the templar archives or in a druid's grove, magic was all that he lived for, all that made his life worth living. He'd cheat everywhere else, if he had to, but not there. He memorized those scrolls down to the smears and inkblots. When Telhami said Seek the guardian, he held nothing back. He'd master magic on magic's terms, not his own.

The same way Ruari played elven games.

Games that Ruari could *never* win.

Magic that he could never master?

Pavek stared into his ale-mug, telling himself that the brew was like broy and led a drinking man into the quagmires of his mind, places he'd never willingly go sober, or drunk on some more reputable liquor. Never mind that his post-hammering peers were red-faced and happy, or that a second barrel had been tapped and euphoria was spreading. For him honey-ale was the same as broy, and he emptied his mug into the roots of the nearest tree.

An offering, perhaps, to the guardian. A prayer that he was not as foolish as that half-wit scum, Ruari who leapt short again, and landed in a groaning sprawl of arms and legs.

If the honey-ale was truly like broy, a few hours should see him clear of its melancholy. He could wait until his head was clear before he let another thought wander between his ears. The sounds of Quraite, from bargaining traders to Ruari stumbling and the distant drone of a grazing kanks lulled him into a pleasant, muzzy mindlessness.

\* \* \*

"Pavek? Pavek—what's wrong?"

Nothing, he thought, but the thought got lost in the dark on its way to his tongue. The sky was brilliant red when he opened his eyes, and filled

with bobbing, faintly green spheres the size of the setting sun. That was Akashia kneeling beside him, her voice full of feminine concern and her face lost in the shifting chaos of his vision. He'd slept through the entire afternoon.

"Must've fallen asleep."

The silhouette nodded. "You're lucky you're not blind, falling asleep with your face into the sun like that. You're sure nothing's wrong? We were worried. No one knew where you'd gone."

Ruari'd seen him, he was sure of that, but Ruari might have his own reasons for not speaking up. Assuming the scum had survived the afternoon himself. The scrub where he'd been losing regularly was deserted and, come to think of it, the air was thick with the smells of what might be a memorable supper.

A nap and the honey-ale had done him good. His stomach churned with healthy hunger and for the first time since Ruari'd poisoned him, his mouth didn't taste of kivit musk.

"I'm hale and hearty. There was nothing to do so I fell asleep. Templars do that, you know. It's part of our training. Keeps us from killing each other when there's no rabble-scum around to harass."

His eyes had adjusted to the sunset light. He watched as Akashia rocked back on her heel with her brows pulled into a sharp-angle over her eyes and her lips pursed in a frown. She must think he was sun-struck—and maybe he was: he couldn't come up with another explanation for that eruption of yellow-robe humor. He wasn't known for his quick wit.

With a hapless little shrug that only deepened her frown, he tried to stand. But he'd slept all afternoon with his legs crossed in front of him. His knees were stiff, his ankles were numb. He got halfway up, then collapsed again with an embarrassing thud.

"You're *sure* you're all right. You didn't *eat* anything, again, did you?"

He swore under his breath—another thing he'd managed not to do in front of her since they'd arrived in Quraite. She scrabbled backward with a hand pressed against her mouth. Pure reflex, he swore again and, more

carefully this time, hauled himself upright. One foot felt like it was buried in hot coals. He leaned against the tree, waiting for the agony to subside.

“I haven’t *eaten* enough to feed a jozhal since you know when. That’s the problem, Kashi—” he swore a third time and turned away. It was true: he was light-headed from the ale, the sun, and not eating, but that was no excuse. He didn’t call Akashia by her familiar name, any more than he called Telhami Grandmother. “Just forget it. I drank too much. Forget everything I’ve said since I opened my eyes.”

“Flandoren says he only filled your mug twice—”

She reached for his mug and had it in her hand before he made a move to stop her. She ran her finger along the rim, then held it tentatively to her lips.

“Ruari’s got nothing to do with this! He spent the whole day playing the fool for his mother’s respectable relations.”

The mug rolled out of Akashia’s limp hand. Pavék considered finding a rock and bashing himself into unconsciousness. But that would have involved walking, and his deceitfully burning foot wasn’t ready to bear his weight.

“Just forget I said that, too.”

He dangled a helping hand arm in front of her face. She ignored it, and all he could see was the top of her head and her shoulders, which were shaking.

“What happened? Did that half-wit scum get his fool self hurt?” he was too frustrated for false compassion.

“He was with the elves when Grandmother asked if he knew where you were. It was the wrong question to ask, I guess. Not really a question, an accusation. He was dirty and battered. She thought—we all thought—the elves he was with started laughing, and he just ran off.”

Pavék swore again, and this time Akashia echoed his words. She took hold of his wrist, but got to her feet without his help.

“I’ll find him and apologize. I should have known better. Maybe if you—?” She raised her eyes to meet his.

He shook his head, there'd be nothing but disaster if he took her well-meaning suggestion. "Leave him be. Let him nurse his anger and his pride awhile; he's earned the right."

"You're sure?"

Pavek shrugged; he wasn't sure about anything, but when he was that age, and even now, when things went sour he preferred to be alone.

"You understand Ruari better than the rest of us together—because you're... If only he didn't hate you so much. If he could talk to you—?3"

"Tomorrow," he said instead of another bitter oath. "I'll talk to him tomorrow morning."

There was a whole night between now and tomorrow. Anything could happen. He might bite off his tongue, but first he desperately wanted to eat. The smells of supper were growing stronger with every breath, and the nerves in his foot had calmed enough that he could walk without limping, which he began to do.

"No!" Akashia said urgently. "Not tomorrow morning—"

He turned around, knowing that he was impatient and annoyed, and that it showed in his expression. "Isn't having me talk to Ruari less important than a magic lesson?" he asked sourly.

"No, that's why I was looking for you. Grandmother wants to talk with you about zarneeka tomorrow morning, as soon as the Moonracers leave. It's worse than you thought: Andorwen says that Laq was sold in the market at Nibenay—until the Shadow-King found out and had everyone driven off and their stalls burnt to the ground. Andorwen says the Moonracers won't trade in Nibenay anymore, nor will any other tribe. He said that the elves knew that the Laq had come from Urik, and that they let everyone in Nibenay know before they left. He said they were going to shut down the Urik market, too."

No great loss, he thought. What the elves brought to Urik, the city could do quite nicely without. But he was puzzled that Escrissar had chosen Nibenay as his first target among the city-states. He'd assumed the

interrogator would loose his poison against Raam, which was closer, without a sorcerer-king, and mired in anarchy since the Dragon's death.

The Shadow-King still ruled secure in Nibenay, with a templatate composed entirely of women. He and Hamanu were familiar adversaries, testing each other's mettle and defenses every decade or so. The last time the two kings harried each other through the wilderness, a pox broke out in the Nibenay camps and spread through both armies like fire. More Urikites died from disease than combat, but those that came back alive spoke respectfully of Nibenay's female-led army.

But Elabon Escrissar wasn't King Hamanu. He and his halfling alchemist weren't interested in conquest. They wanted nothing less than the destruction of every city-state in the Tablelands. And for that, setting two surviving sorcerer-kings at each other's throats (and they'd be at each other's throats if Nibenay accused Urik of exporting a deadly, intoxicating poison) was a very good strategy indeed. Any war with Nibenay always attracted the attention of Gulg. That would put the three surviving sorcerer-kings at war with each other.

He couldn't think of a better recipe for complete anarchy and collapse.

"You've thought of something?" Akashia inquired. "Elabon Escrissar knows what he's doing, or his halfling does. I wonder how much Laq they make from one of your zarneeka shipments. And how much they've already got in reserve."

"Don't you know? We thought—I thought you did. You said you'd seen them making it. You described the halfling. We—I thought you'd know what we should do with our zarneeka."

"That's simple enough," Pavek said, taking a step toward the cookfires, then another. "You keep it, and pray that Escrissar *doesn't have* all he needs in reserve, *doesn't* know how to make more Laq without your precious seeds, and *doesn't* know where it comes from. Second thought: you burn it, every last seed, bush, tree, and stalk—then, even if he finds Quraite, it doesn't help him. You do that, or you might as well put his name on your amphorae next time you take them to Urik, because he's going to get them."

"You'll tell that to Grandmother tomorrow?"

He stopped and turned to face her again. “If she asks. If I’m not chasing after Ruari—”

“The commoners of Urik can’t afford healers, but they can buy Ral’s Breath. We harvest the seeds for them. It’s not right that they should suffer; there’s got to be another way.”

“Here, maybe, but not in Urik. Ask the rabble which they want: a bitter yellow powder or war. That’s what Escrissar and his halfling want, and what they’ll get. If they’ve got enough Laq to start selling it in Nibenay, it may already be too late.”

“I thought you’d know a better way. I thought that’s why you left Urik and why you wanted to master druidry. So you could help.”

He couldn’t meet her stare. “I’ve given you all the help I can: burn it and pray. If it’s not what you want to hear me say in Telhami’s hut tomorrow, then tell me not to show up. Don’t worry that I’ll tell anyone else what I think; I won’t. You and Telhami work it out yourselves. Zarneeka’s Quraite’s problem, not mine.”

“You are a templar. You’re a templar in the blood and bone. You’re broken and will never change.”

He walked away in silence, got himself a bowl, and got on line for supper.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

“It’s morning,” a voice announced, accompanied by a sandal-shod nudge in Pavek’s floating ribs.

He groaned, a deeper and more painful sound than he expected. His eyes opened grittily to light streaming through the bachelor hut’s reed wall and to a flood of memories: Last evening he’d made a fool of himself with Akashia, first with his oafish templar humor, then by arguing with her about druid affairs: zarneeka and Urik. After that, he’d plopped himself down within reach of the Moonracer’s barrel and drunk too much honey-ale. Not as much as he would have when he’d done his drinking in Joat’s Den, but too much for a man no longer accustomed to it. He remembered everyone else leaving for their beds, even the elves, and rising oh-so-carefully to his feet for the treacherous walk to his bed.

But, if he could remember all that and bear the light without cringing, then he could probably roll over without his blood sloshing painfully from one side of his skull to the other, the way it did after a night at Joat’s.

So he rotated, and the face of the man who’d awakened him resolved into Yohan’s leathery features.

“How long past dawn?” he asked working his mouth to get rid of its sour taste.

“High time for you to get your lazy bones off the floor. The Moonracers have folded up their tents and raised a cloud of dust over the salt flats. Sun’s two hands above the trees.”

Now he remembered exactly why he’d taken refuge beside the ale barrel. With a single syllable oath of despair, he sat up. “The meeting in Telhami’s hut. Is it over? What did Akashia say? Did she convince the others to keep on taking zarneeka seeds to Urik?” His tongue still tasted like the inside of a slop bucket, but there was nothing he could do about it until he got to the well, which seemed, suddenly, a long walk away.

“They’re waiting for you,” Yohan informed him, dropping a hide-wrapped travel flask into his lap. “You’re the one who knows Urik and its templars.”

He unstopped the flask and passed the opening quickly beneath his nose: old habits, again. Mention had been made of Urik and templars, and when Urik was in a templar’s mind, no amount of caution was excessive. But the piercing scent of bitterroot filled his nostrils, and he took a full-mouth swig. The days-old taste vanished. After another pull, he returned a half-emptied flask with a grunt of thanks.

Yohan tossed him a freshly washed and still damp shirt. Six days’ of unshaved beard snagged the cloth as he tugged it over his head. He stroked his chin with a thumb. If he didn’t want to face the druids looking like squatter-scum, he needed a lengthy session with a razor and lump of pumice.

The veteran dwarf extended his arm and made a fist, having apparently read his thoughts. “No rime for that. They’re waiting.”

“I don’t understand why they’re waiting,” he complained. I’ve got nothing to say. Akashia knows what I think.”

“And what do you think, Just-Plain Pavek?” The question held a hint of challenge.

He grasped the dwarf’s wrist and gained his feet with a clean jerk. “Burn it all, every last bush and seed, then pray no one comes looking. Same as I thought last night. Akashia thinks otherwise. I told her I won’t argue with her. I’m not getting myself caught between her and Telhami.”

All the bachelor bedding was neatly rolled against the outer walls as they walked down the center of the long hut. All except his own, which needed airing, and—he counted twice to be certain—Ruari’s, which hadn’t been touched since someone spread it out the previous evening. “Where’s he this morning?”

“You won’t get caught between Akashia and Grandmother,” Yohan ignored his question completely. “They agree with each other.”

Quraite was quiet outside the bachelors' hut, with no visible signs of the recent festivities. A few farmers were using the morning's last few cool moments to do the heavy work of arranging the evening's fire in the pit-hearth. They hailed Yohan and him with unusual friendliness—or so he thought; he still had trouble measuring these things.

The men said nothing until they reached the well where they were beyond anyone's earshot. Pavek stretched the night-kinks out of his shoulders raising a bucket of cool water to the surface.

"Why wait for me, if the women agree with each other? Why not just load up the bugs and start riding toward Urik?"

He waited a moment for the dwarf's answer, and when none seemed forthcoming—as none had been to his question about Ruari—he bent over the bucket to wash his face. "I'm the one who says when the bugs are loaded—" Pavek continued splashing water on his cheeks "—and when we leave for Urik. And *I'm* the one who wants to hear you speak your mind beneath Grandmother's roof."

He sprayed an unwitting mouthful of water over the edge of the bucket. "You what?"

"I agree with you, that's all. Quraite's been sending zarneeka to Urik since before Grandmother was born, or so she says. And she says, too, that Quraite's not going to fail its obligations just because some Lion's pet templar has dealt himself into the exchange. I say it's all dangerous nonsense. Athas isn't the place it was before Grandmother was born. Things could change now and stay changed for another thousand years, and maybe wind up worse than they were. Whatever good Ral's Breath does for the rabble, it isn't enough to risk hauling zarneeka seeds to Urik now, or ever again. You know it; I know it. And the guardian knows it, too. But Quraite's used to my saying 'burn the whole crop.' I've never been in favor of it. Damn city doesn't have anything we need; we're *surrounded* by salt, no point in trading for it!"

"The guardian?" Pavek asked, after wiping his chin on his sleeve. "With the *guardian* against it, they can't seriously be thinking of taking zarneeka to Urik again."

Yohan gestured helplessly. “I only know what they tell me—” he corrected himself “—what Ruari told me after he talked to Kashi. It wouldn’t be the first time the women and the guardian have disagreed.”

The rope winch whined as Pavék let the bucket plummet down the well shaft to the water. “They disobey the guardian?” he asked, trying—and failing utterly—to convince himself that this made any sort of sense. “There are rotting bones in Telhami’s grove. Near as I can tell, this guardian just reaches out of the ground with roots for fingers, and grabs the ones it doesn’t like—”

“Thought so,” Yohan grunted, as if this settled some age-old doubt in his mind. “I couldn’t make anything happen, you know. Tried ’til my eyes bugged out of my head. Wasn’t worth the effort, so I gave it up life’s good enough here without druidry. But you’re different. They say you turned yourself into a sorcerer-king’s fountain that first day. You’ve stuck with it, and you’ve met the guardian. When you speak up, they’ll hear the guardian’s voice. Maybe they’ll listen.”

He shook his head. In his limited experience, Quraite’s guardian was a presence, not a personality, not something a man met or spoke with. “I can’t help,” he insisted, backing away. Yohan matched him step for step. “Maybe the guardian speaks to the others, but it doesn’t speak to me. And, anyway, I’m no persuader.”

“Disaster will come to Quraite if they send zarneeka seeds to the city again! The Lion of Urik will stalk across the salt flats. Do you want that to happen?” Yohan’s tone hardened and his jaw jutted forward.

“What happens happens. If Telhami’s gotten away with disobeying the guardian before, maybe she’ll get away with it again. Maybe she’s wiser than the guardian.”

Dwarves stood shorter than humans. The top of Yohan’s bald head barely cleared the middle of his chest. It wasn’t easy for Yohan to launch a backhanded clout against the side of a taller man’s skull and land it before that taller man sidestepped the danger, but Yohan got the job done with a resounding crack.

“That’s your old yellow robe talking!” Pavek swung wide, and Yohan ducked out of harm’s way. “Forget the bureaus. Haven’t you learned anything since we hauled you out of Urik?”

“I’ve learned Telhami runs Quraite the same way Hamanu runs the Urik templatate.”

Yohan struck his lower jaw again, and his teeth rammed together. He just missed taking a bite out of his own tongue and lost all desire for persuasive *conversation*. He squatted down in a brawler’s ready stance: one fist guarding his face, the other ready to jab any available target. But there weren’t many more futile things than a human man trading punches with a solid, healthy dwarf. Yohan’s squat was deeper, his fists were huge, and his guard was impenetrable.

They wove on swaying, trading feints, taking each other’s measure until Yohan announced: “You’re a waste of my good time, Just-Plain Pavek.”

The dwarf retreated, brushing one foot along the ground in a reverse arc as he spoke. The level of his fists and shoulders remained constant; no targets flashed before Pavek’s eyes to draw a foolish attack.

“I’ve tried to befriend you here. You’ve got a few good qualities, but they’re worthless because you’re the lying sort. I don’t keep honor with liars.”

Pavek accepted himself as many unsavory things, but he wasn’t a liar, at least not when it counted. “I’ve never lied to you. I’ve kept my mouth shut when I had to, and I’ve said what had to be said to keep the peace—” he thought of Ruari and the kivit poison’ “—but you know bloody well that’s not lying.”

“You lie to yourself, Pavek. You just plain lie to yourself all the rime. Yes, you’re honest with everyone else, and honorable, after a templar’s fashion. That makes it worse! You’ve got a better life here already than you ever hoped to have in Urik: Regulator of the Third Rank! Scraping from the bottom of the civil bureau barrel. Quraite would listen to you, but do you talk? Do you even listen? No! What happens, happens! Death happens, Pavek. Death is what happens to us all, but I’d like to put mine off a little

while longer. What about you, Regulator Pavek? Do you want to die? Do you want Akashia to get caught on Urik's streets? Do you want her to die in Elabon Escrissar's interrogation chamber? Do you want to see Quraite's fields and groves laid waste by the Lion's pet? I'm sure Escrissar will arrange it, Just-Plain Pavek—unless you die first. But you're not a lucky man, are you, Just-Plain Pavek? And templars don't fight for principles, do you, Regulator Pavek? Have you seen a free village when the templars are through with it? It's not a pretty sight, I can promise you that, no lie there."

"Back off," Pavek snarled, taking his own advice. "I told you: I'm no liar and I'm no persuader, either; they're one and the same. Last night I told Akashia what I thought. It did no good; it did worse than no good. She wouldn't listen."

"You gave up. You didn't try. You walked away."

"I told her what I thought. What more could I do?"

"Try again. Go into Grandmother's hut right now and repeat what you said last night. Remind them both what Elabon Escrissar is and what he'll do—"

They were four paces apart now, too far for a punch or jab, far enough to think clearly about what was happening.

He narrowed his eyes. "You know Elabon Escrissar, don't you? From where? Where are *you* from, anyway? You're no farmer. You wore a medallion and a yellow robe once yourself, didn't you?"

Yohan frowned and shook his head. "Wondered when you'd get around to asking that question. You've been thinking it since that first day outside the city gate—"

"Mind-bender?"

Another shake of the head.

"You know the templarate. You know the way templars talk, the way templars think. You know Escrissar—know his type, at least. Maybe not Urik, but Raam? Tyr? Which bureau, which city?"

"No city. Not from around here at all, not that it matters. Quraite's been my home since your grandfather was a pup. It's what I care about, I've

forgotten most of the rest.”

“Quraite’s your focus?”

“Maybe. Are you going into that hut now, or are you going to keep lying and running until I plow the ground with that hard skull of yours?”

Yohan pointed toward Telhami’s hut, where he’d been, unconsciously and accidentally, retreating. Through the open door, he could see the light cloth of the druids’ robes fluttering in a gentle, unnatural breeze. He couldn’t see Telhami but she was undoubtedly there, doing things the way she’d always done them. She’d gambled before with Quraite’s guardian—or so Yohan said—but the stakes were higher now that the Dragon was gone and Athas had changed.

And because the stakes had been raised to their highest, Yohan said he should speak his mind. *Him*: ten years in a templar orphanage, ten years a templar. He didn’t trust his own judgment. Why should anyone else?

His gut churned over: he’d drunk last night, but never eaten.

“If I did persuade them—” he said, for his own ears, not Yohan’s “—if they listen to me, and I’m wrong... They’d be fools to listen to city-scum like me.”

“What are you if fate proves you right and you die knowing you could have kept Quraite alive—kept Urik alive, if that’s what you care about? What happens, happens, Pavek, right? You play the game once, and you play it with your life. Are you brave enough to let Grandmother and the others make up their own minds?”

When the matter was stated that way, in that tone, by a leering dwarf, it really wasn’t a question. A man either took an unhesitating step across the threshold, or a man wasn’t a man at all. And as he wasn’t ready to concede that much he tightened his jaw and entered the hut.

Telhami sat on her sleeping platform, a bowl of tea on her left and Akashia on her right. Other druids—about eight of them, not including Ruari—stood along the walls or sat on the floor with a handful of the farmers among them.

Every face turned toward him, smiled, and greeted him with a name or nod, as if he hadn't kept them waiting for who knew how long... as if they hadn't heard the tag-end of his discussion with Yohan. Akashia herself offered him tea. If it had been anyone else, he might have accepted, but he couldn't meet her eyes or trust himself to take the bowl from her hands without dropping it.

A shadow fell from the doorway to his shoulder: Yohan stood beside him, one hand pressed against his ribs, pushing him forward. He thought—hoped—it was a signal for him to move aside, take a more inconspicuous place in an outside corner. But those hopes died. He took one step, and his shirt tightened as if an inix had clamped its jaw over the cloth.

“Pavek's ready to talk,” Yohan announced. “Aren't you, Pavek?”

So he talked, softly at first. Telhami's face was calm. Her eyes, seemingly focused on some other time and place, were unreadable. Akashia, he discovered after a moment, was no more able to look at him than he'd been able to look at her. But everyone else was staring at him, none more pointedly than Yohan, himself.

He told them about Laq: what he'd seen of its making, how it killed, and then, for no good reason at all, he told them about Zvain.

“He lost his father to that poison—” Never mind that the boy had said the raver wasn't his father “—and his mother. He's an orphan now on the streets of Urik. A common person of Urik, one of those you say you're helping. What good does your zarneeka do him? He can't afford to buy Ral's Breath; it can't cure the emptiness in his life. It won't protect him from the slavers and worse that haunt Urik's streets, looking for orphans like him. Picture him in your mind, then ask him how important your precious zarneeka is to him when he's not going to get Ral's Breath, he's just going to have to live with the havoc and destruction Laq wreaks on his world—”

The words stopped flowing as suddenly as they had begun. His voice, which had risen to an impassioned bellow, went quiet. His tongue lay lifeless on the floor of his mouth. There wasn't another mortal sound in the

hut. All eyes were on him, even Akashia's. All mouths gaped silently open, even Telhami's.

And he realized, as his knees went liquid, that he was not alone. The guardian's essence had flowed through him, as it flowed through Akashia when she healed or Telhami when she flew invisibly from one part of Quraite to another. The guardian had shaped the words he, himself, had chosen to speak. The guardian had lent him an eloquence and power that could not be ignored.

He tried again to speak, to offer an explanation, an excuse for what had happened, but the guardian was finished with him. Its essence drained away, swirling down his legs like wind and water. Yohan's fist, still clamped over his shirt, was a necessary support.

"I'm—I'm not—I'm finished," he stammered before Yohan reeled him in.

"He speaks well for me," someone whose face Pavek couldn't see, whose voice he didn't recognize, announced to the others.

Murmured harmony rippled through the hut, around and behind him, but not in front of him, where neither Telhami nor Akashia appeared pleased.

"You speak well, indeed," the old woman said with a nod, her cold voice confirming what his eyes had seen. "But your Zvain is not an ordinary citizen of Urik. We cannot enrich the future of Athas if we worry now about the fates of orphans who live beneath the city's streets, scrounging food and succumbing to temptations."

"Zvain—" Pavek began haltingly, seeking words that would explain how ordinary the boy was in the brutal world of Urik, so different from Quraite.

"Is doomed," Telhami concluded, and it seemed, from the set of her spine and the bright intensity of her eyes, that the guardian flowed with her, now. "There's nothing anyone can do for him. We must think about those who will survive. They're the future. We will not burn our zarneeka bushes for their sakes. We will not cower here, hiding from enemies we have not

measured for ourselves. We will return to Urik. We will study this poison, Laq, and this High Templar and his minions. And we will thwart his ambitions without—”

Suddenly, Telhami fell, clutching her gut and nearly tumbling from her platform. Akashia was right there, panic in her face and voice, but not in the commands she shouted, “Clear a path! Let the air in! Fetch water!” nor was it in her arms as she cradled the woman she revered as Grandmother.

Pavek retreated with the others, making room for the breezes and for the druid dashed for the well with a bowl in his hands. He crowded against Yohan, whose brawny arm shivered against his back. It seemed clear, if ominous, to a templar: Quraite’s guardian did not approve of Telhami’s plan and Quraite’s guardian *was* more powerful than any living druid. Perhaps, as Yohan claimed, the guardian had ignored the community’s prior disobedience, as Hamanu tolerated an occasional curse against his name and as slaveowners endured their living property’s sullen insolence; but it wasn’t ignoring disobedience this time.

Before the water arrived, a flickering light began to radiate across Telhami’s body. Swiftly, the soft yellow light thickened until Akashia’s arms could not be seen through the dazzle.

*She’s dying*, Pavek thought. *Quraite’s claiming her, as it claimed the bones in her grove.* For a heartbeat he wondered if the guardian’s appetite would be sated with the old woman, or if it would feed on additional disobedience, Akashia’s disobedience. Then the radiance collapsed, and coherent thought fled his mind.

Dazed and blinking, but otherwise unharmed, Akashia sat empty-handed in the dusty sunlight of an Athasian day.

“She’s gone,” someone whispered, a farmer by the look of her.

“Gone,” echoed from the other side of the room, more frantic as the instant of disbelief yielded to grief and unbearable emptiness.

“Grandmother’s gone!” erupted from several mouths, several hearts-bereavement no longer limited to the farmers.

The unimaginable had happened. The unthinkable demanded immediate attention. Akashia stood up, pale and shaken, but apparently aware of her responsibilities. Pavek felt himself grow calmer, felt his feet root themselves in the dirt again as she raised her hands to summon the guardian and read its essence. In the company of so many druids, in such extraordinary circumstances, he felt it, too, though he lacked the wisdom and experience to interpret the message, whipping through his body and his mind.

“Not *gone*,” Akashia announced after a moment, emphasizing finality and rejecting it at the same time. “She’s gone to the stowaway. The stowaway’s attacked. The stowaway’s breached! She seeks. She finds...”

With her voice trailing off into a sob, Akashia fled the hut. The rest followed, farmer and druid alike, her words having evidently had more meaning to them than they’d had to him. He guessed, but did not know.

He caught Yohan’s arm. “What stowaway?” he asked as dwarf asked: “Who breached it?”

They glowered, each waiting for the other to answer first, and listening as alarm raced through the village. Quraiters who had not been included in the meeting ran past the open door, all headed for the southeast path: the path by which Pavek had entered Quraite and that he had not explored since, because the salt plain encroached closest there.

“Who?” Yohan demanded, breaking loose from Pavek’s grip.

“No idea,” Pavek insisted with a shrug.

He’d felt something, and that was more than Yohan had possibly done, but that was all, and that was completely gone now. He stood in the doorway. Only a few weanling children remained in the common, tended by a few adults whose southeasterly pointing faces proclaimed that they’d rather be somewhere else.

“What’s the stowaway? If I knew that—maybe—”

Yohan pressed behind him in the doorway. “Where they store the zarneeka seeds to ripen and age under the ground.” He shouldered past and started walking.

There was no one left to give him an order, so he fell in step a few paces behind. The shimmering white expanse of the salt wastes was visible from the far side of the tree ring around the village. A few clumps of rock and scraggly bushes dotted the wilderness. No druid could nurture a grove this close to the Sun's Fist. But Yohan kept going, following Quraiters strung out in a sparse line until they were indistinguishable from the wilderness itself.

\* \* \*

They gathered in a place without trees or water, where the salt flats seemed a bit closer and the village behind them was reduced to a line of half-sized trees. Pavek, at the rear of the gathering, was as ignorant as he'd been at the hut. But the crowd parted for him—or it parted for Yohan—and he was able to flow to the center in the dwarfs wake.

Telhami sat on an unremarkable stone beside a shallow, round, and apparently empty hole. She sifted gritty dirt through the fingers of one hand into the palm of the other. Her neck was bent deeply: Pavek remembered that sunlight hurt her eyes, and remembered her broad-brimmed, veiled hat hanging in its place by the door. He wished he'd thought to bring it with him; a foolish, sentimental wish since, when he left the hut, he hadn't known where he was going.

The sifted grit's color, yellow-like the thin cloud of dust over the hole—and its bitter—turning-numb taste as it invaded his nose and mouth, answered all the other questions bubbling in Pavek's mind.

A downcast Akashia approached them. "Ruari," she whispered to Yohan, loudly enough for Pavek to hear. The dwarf spat into the yellow-flecked ground.

"Can't be," he countered. "That doesn't square with Telhami collapsing right when she did. The moment was too perfect. You were going to take zarneeka to Urik; now you can't. Ruari couldn't be eavesdropping and

undermining at the same time. Don't blame the half-wit scum just because your guardian got the upper hand."

Akashia gave him a sharp-edged glower. "He was sitting *here*, in the ruins, waiting for Grandmother when she arrived. He confessed everything. He'd talked to the elves; he knew everything we knew. He was afraid you'd persuade us to take the zarneeka to Urik, or steal it yourself, if you couldn't. He decided to take matters into his own hands. He hates you, Pavek. Hates you with a passion that blinds him to everything else. He thought he was the only one who could stop you."

"But he stopped you instead," Pavek snorted with irony and earned himself another bitter look.

"We're right, Pavek, and you're wrong. You're all wrong: both of you and Ruari, as well."

"The guardian disagrees."

"This was Ruari's doing: his hate, his blindness."

"Where is he? This time I *do* want to talk to him."

"I don't know." Akashia flinched toward Telhami as she turned away.

Pavek had learned the language of guilt and anxiety before he left the orphanage. It was an early, essential part of a templar's education. Instructors made certain their students learned to read the truth on the faces around them, and—if they were wise or clever—to hide their own emotions behind an enigmatic, intimidating sneer. Pavek wore a templar sneer when he cast a shadow over Telhami and called her name.

The instructors had never claimed he was wise or clever. They'd repeatedly said he was a fool who didn't know when to keep his big mouth shut.

"Where'd you send Ruari?" he demanded.

She opened her hands. The yellow-stained dirt streamed to the ground. "I didn't send him anywhere. He's hiding in his grove."

"Where's his grove?"

“I can’t tell you,” her voice was faint and listless. “He wished for privacy, Just-Plain Pavek. I grant it to him. He wants to be alone for a while. I told him what you said. He *needs* to be alone.”

“The guardian wouldn’t suck his bones into the ground, for you?” He could hear the foolishness in his voice. He wished he could swallow his tongue, but recklessness was another old habit, impossible to resist when righteousness fanned its flames. “He wished for privacy, instead, and you granted his wish. For how long, Telhami? How long does Ruari *need* to be alone in his grove. Until he starves?”

“A druid can’t starve in his grove,” Yohan said from behind. “Mind yourself. Ruari’s safe enough in his grove, if that’s where he is.”

Recklessness, it seemed, was catching.

He spread his feet to shoulder width and propped his fists atop his hips. “Where is the scum? I want to tell him he’s done the right thing. I *need* to tell him. How can I find him?”

“You *can’t*!” Akashia sprang, shouting, to her feet. She smashed her fist sincerely, but ineffectively, against his chest. “Ruari’s gone to his grove and pulled it in around him. He’s cut himself off. He doesn’t want to be found. He doesn’t want anything to do with anyone, ever again.”

“I’m not interested in what the scum wants. Point me toward his grove. I’ll walk until I find the little beggar.”

“Knowing where Ruari’s grove is—was—won’t help you. He’s hiding, Pavek,” Telhami said in a soft voice that, nonetheless, captured his attention. “There’s nothing any of us can do, you least of all. *Ruari’s* hiding. His choice—a druid’s choice—not mine. Ruari hasn’t stopped anything. Zarneeka will go to Urik as it always has; that’s *my* choice. He couldn’t accept that. I couldn’t let him leave Quraite, not as full of spite and vengeance as he was. He chose to hide forever and a day. Forever’s a long time, Just-Plain Pavek, but a day or a week will do him good. But the choice to hide was his, and the choice to return will be his. And mine. This is not a quarrel between him and you, Pavek. Ruari is a druid, and this is the way it must be, Pavek. Do you understand?”

“In my dreams, great one.” The invocation for fire was written clearly in his mind’s eye. The power to transform the very air around them into a wall of flames throbbed beneath his feet. Telhami knew it; he could look into those ancient, unblinking eyes and see the knowledge there. And power far greater than any he could hope to command.

*Your choice, Pavek.* Her voice was clear, but her lips hadn’t moved.

The tips of his fingers touched; the guardian’s power surged within him, then ebbed. He wasn’t a druid. He couldn’t choose to hide in a grove. He could choose between understanding and incineration: a familiar sort of choice for a man who’d worn King Hamanu’s yellow. A comfortable choice.

Ruari meant nothing to him. Less than nothing. The scum simply hated him to the point of poison and beyond, because of his father, not zarneeka. Let Ruari hide in his damned grove. Let him stay there until he rotted, if he couldn’t starve. He was more trouble than he was worth; the world wasn’t losing anything—

Except justice: a balance of rights and wrongs between him and Ruari that could never be redressed with one of them hiding forever and a day. The invocation erased itself; the power evaporated.

“I don’t understand, and I refuse to make your choice. I *will* find him.”

The cool, guiding breeze from a druid’s grove blew only when the druid willed it to. The air around the ruined stowaway grew still as Quraite’s druids, one by one and following Telhami’s example, inhaled the essence of their groves.

“There is nothing to follow,” Telhami said triumphantly. “It cannot be done.”

But druidry wasn’t the only magic in Quraite. A small, ceramic lump had entered the guardian’s land with Pavek. He had taken it directly from King Hamanu’s hands when he was still a boy living in the templar orphanage. The memory of the king’s stale breath, his sulphurous eyes, and the burning heat of his flesh would never fade. Nor, King Hamanu had assured him and the dozen other youngsters inducted into the templatate

that day, would his memory of each of them. A Urik templar was linked to his medallion.

Though the crude ceramic might be exchanged for fine carved stone or precious metal—if a templar rose high enough through the ranks—the unique impression made on Induction Day endured.

The medallions could only be used by the templar into whose hands it had been placed by the king. Woe betide the forgetful templar who lost his medallion, and greater woe betide the fool who, finding a stray medallion, tried to use it.

Pavek could have selected his medallion from a hundred perfect forgeries. Even here in Quraite, where the guardian averted Hamanu's prying eyes, he felt its absence as a nagging hole in his consciousness, stronger or weaker depending on the medallion's actual location.

Depending on Ruari's location, since Ruari had the medallion.

Without the competing influences of twenty-odd breezy groves to confound him, Pavek needed only to close his eyes and turn his head to determine the direction in which his medallion could be found. There was a chance the half-wit scum had left it in the bachelors' hut with his bedding, but Pavek found himself looking away from the village when he opened his eyes. He started walking without saying a word.

Akashia called him; Telhami also—and voices he didn't recognize. If Yohan's had been among them, he might have reconsidered. But the dwarf held his peace and soon the only sounds were those of his own sandals on the dry ground.

\* \* \*

He expected something odd, something sudden or frightening, but Ruari's grove, when it came into sight, was a low-lying tangle of briars and saplings, far smaller than Telhami's or Akashia's, but otherwise essentially the same. A shimmer of druidry hung about the place, which from the outside seemed no more than few hundred paces across. There certainly

was no sign of Ruari himself, though the ache of the missing medallion was a palpable force in Pavek's mind. He hesitated before wading into the rampant shrubbery, and held his breath until his lungs burned once he entered the grove. Thorns carved bloody tracks into his legs, but that was the true nature of thorns and nothing magical.

"Ruari!" he shouted loudly enough to penetrate every shadow. "Stop hiding."

There was no answer; he hadn't truly expected one. He thrashed and cursed his way to what seemed to be the visible center of the grove. The medallion felt close enough to touch, but Ruari was nowhere to be seen.

"She says this hiding-thing is your choice. You may as well come out where I can see you. I'm not going anywhere until you know you did the right thing, wrecking the stowaway."

Something cracked the base of Pavek's skull. It might have been a nut or a small stone; he didn't turn around.

"Talk to me, street-scum."

"Go away!" a familiar, anger-filled voice shouted, followed by another pellet striking his flank.

He stayed right where he was, looking straight ahead, out of the grove. "We can't let Telhami settle this for us, street-scum."

"I'm not street-scum!" Another shout, closer by the sound, and another pellet flung hard enough to make him wince.

"You act like it: another dumb-fool, too-smart-to-think clod of street-scum. I know the type."

"You know *nothing!*"

But even in the absence of footfalls through the brush, the medallion told him when to turn around, where to grab himself an armful of street-scum. Ruari kicked and punched and clamped his teeth into Pavek's forearm—for which he clouted him hard behind the ear. Then dropped the stunned fool into the thorns.

"You want to hate yellow-robe templars, scum, that's all right with me. I hate a few myself. You want to hate your father or your mother, that's all

right, too. I didn't have much luck with my parents, either. We're even. But you want to take your hate out on me, and that's just plain foolish, street-scum."

"That's what you say!"

Fists forward and teeth bared, Ruari surged out of the briars.

They grappled for no more than a moment before Pavek got the upper hand and hurled him into the thorns again. "That's what I say because it's the truth. You—"

Ruari took a deep breath and launched himself again. Pavek had enough time to step aside, which would have allowed the youth to dive head-first into the underbrush. His mind's eye showed the gouged and bleeding copper-skinned face that would result. He was tempted, but stayed where he was, taking the scum's charge full-force in his gut.

They both went down, with Ruari pummeling Pavek's flanks. Yohan had taught his pupil well; Ruari knew how to land an effective punch with his compact fists and where to aim them. Pavek roared and thrashed free. A wicked thorn caught below the corner of his right eye as he did, and he got to his feet with a finger-long gash across his cheek. The sight of his blood made Ruari bolder and more reckless than the scum already was. The thought that he might have been seriously injured brought out Pavek's coldest rage.

"You want to prove something, scum? Now's your time. Give me your best, and I'll give a better reason to hate templars—"

He settled into the brawler's stance he'd shown to Yohan, then he lowered a fist, daring Ruari to strike at his jaw. Ruari took the dare, leaving his right side undefended. Pavek was heavier, faster, and far more experienced; he beat aside Ruari's punch and struck twice, left-handed, on the scum's jaw and right shoulder before withdrawing.

Ruari's lips trembled and, hard as he tried, he couldn't hold his right arm steady.

"Had enough?"

The half-wit shook his head and charged. Pavek leaned away from the attack, stuck out an arm, and caught Ruari across the ribs, knocking the wind out of him. This time Ruari couldn't clamber upright. He lay awkwardly in the briars, gasping for breath.

"What's it going to take to get through to you that I'm not your enemy? I'm not your father and you're not going to prove anything by hating me as if I were. You've damn near twice lost the only home you've got, and what have you got to show for it? I'm still here, and you're one gasp away from being meat."

Ruari worked his mouth, trying to muster enough strength and saliva to spit.

"Fool," Pavek muttered.

He thumped Ruari's still-heaving ribs with his foot. The youth began to choke. Pavek grabbed an arm and jerked him to his feet. Ruari's eyes were full of spite, but he couldn't talk, couldn't stand on his own feet, and didn't want to land in the briars again. He clung to Pavek's arm; the ceramic medallion dangled around his neck in easy reach. Pavek left it hanging there, knowing that so long as the half-elf wore it, he'd know where the scum was. And fearing that, short of killing Ruari, he wasn't ever going to convince the stubborn scum that there was no good reason for them to feud with each other.

They stood there a while, with Pavek keeping an ungentle hold on Ruari's arm. Ruari couldn't fill his lungs. He wheezed and trembled, leaning hard against him, because he could do nothing else.

Pavek knew, from long years on the practice ground, that elves could gasp themselves to death if their lungs collapsed. He didn't think he'd hit Ruari nearly hard enough, but it was always hard to gauge the vulnerabilities of half-elves. Sometimes they were weaker than either of their parents.

"Come on, Ru," Pavek urged, forgetting himself and using the youth's familiar name. "Calm down. Take it slow." He felt something soft brush against the back of his legs: kivits, three of them, their ears twitching each time Ruari gasped, their large, dark eyes seemingly glazed with anxious

tears. They rose up on their hind-legs and touched the youth's limp legs with dexterous forepaws.

Familiars, Pavek thought. Every half-elf was supposed to have them. His old nemesis the administrator Metica was rumored to sleep with a nest of poisonous snakes. He didn't want to think what sort of familiars Elabon Escrissar might keep. But the kivits were clearly Ruari's familiars, and just as clearly distressed by the sight of him.

"I'm getting tired of this," he complained as he swept an arm under Ruari's legs, lifting him up. "I'm no nursemaid."

Now that Ruari had shown himself, the features of the grove were apparent. Pavek carried Ruari to the side of a small, bubbling pool and propped him up against a sapling willow tree. The kivits bounded onto Ruari's shoulders, nuzzling into his hair and against his face. Pavek raised a hand to chase them away, but Ruari's eyes had closed, and he was breathing easier.

He tended his own cuts and scratches in the pool, then sat on his heels, waiting for Ruari to complete his recovery. It didn't take long.

"Nothing's changed. I still hate you. You're still a lying, treacherous lump-of-scum templar, and I'm still going to kill you."

"Give it up, scum. You're not a dwarf. You don't have a to-the-death focus to worry about. Stop being so stubborn and think straight for a change. If I'd wanted to kill you or hurt you or anyone else, I could have done it ten times over by now. I'm not your enemy. I'm not Quraite's enemy. I'm not anybody's enemy—except some templars back in Urik: the ones making Laq. We're on the same side, Ruari. While you were wrecking that stowaway, I was trying to convince Telhami and Akashia not to take any more zarneeka to Urik. They weren't listening to me, but you stopped them. You did the better job."

Ruari scratched the itchy spots on each of his kivits before he met Pavek's stare. "How do I know I can believe you? You lie real good, templar-man, like you lied about my poison."

“You believe a man after you ask what he’s got to gain by lying. I’ve got nothing to gain by lying to you, *and* I haven’t killed you yet. That should be enough.”

“Kashi.” Ruari looked down at the kivits as soon as he’d uttered the word.

“Mekillots will fly first. You may enjoy being a fool, but I don’t. That woman’s never going to be interested in an ugly, third-rank templar.”

“She is.”

“I’m not,” Pavek insisted with a force that surprised himself. “I know better than to overreach.”

Ruari pushed the kivits down and rose unsteadily to his feet. “I’d kill you.”

“She’d kill me first.”

“She wouldn’t. Kashi’s not like that. She doesn’t see the evil in a person.”

He could think of a dozen things to say, all of which would have set them brawling again. Instead, he extended a finger toward a kivit and tickled the tip of the inquisitive creature’s nose.

“All the more reason to keep her and zarneeka out of Urik. You did a good job with that stowaway.”

Ruari sat down again. “Telhami’s angry at me. I never saw her so angry. I thought she was going to invoke the guardian and suck my bones into the ground.”

“Maybe she wanted to, but none of the other druids at that meeting this morning, except Akashia and Telhami, wanted to send zarneeka to Urik, and I don’t think the guardian did either.”

Ruari shredded a blade of grass. “Can you really feel the guardian, or is that just more lies?”

“No lies. I’m a lousy liar.”

Ruari swore softly and shredded another blade of grass. “I wish you’d never come to Quraite.”

“I wish I’d never seen a man poisoned by Laq, then I wouldn’t have needed to come. You ready to go home?”

Ruari said he was, but he was weak and wheezing before they left the grove. So they sat talking by the pool, getting past being enemies without becoming friends. The sun was setting when they returned to the village. Pavék went looking for Yohan, but the dwarf was gone, and so were Akashia, two farmers and five kanks: Telhami’d evoked a whirlwind to separate the ripened zarneeka from the sand, then she’d sealed it up and sent it on its way to Urik.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The air remained cool from the recent dawn when Akashia, Yohan, and two awestruck Quraite farmers set out afoot from the market village of Modekan, headed for the brilliant yellow walls of Urik. After four day's travel kank-back across the wastelands, the farmers were eager to see the Lion-King's city; Akashia wanted to finish their business quickly, uneventfully.

No one knew what Yohan was thinking—except that he didn't approve, and he hadn't said more than two words at a time since they left Quraite.

It wasn't Modekan's Day for the Urik markets; they had the road to themselves. Akashia had ample time to relax, think, and get anxious again. They took some chances bringing zarneeka to Urik on a day when it and they weren't expected. She could hope that the Modekan registrar had reported to his superiors in the templatate, and that the repulsive dwarf they traded with would be at his procurer's table in the customhouse.

And she could hope that the dwarf would shepherd the zarneeka powder to its proper destination: a thousand folded papers of Ral's Breath powder. But for that hope to become real, she had to hope, above all else, that Just-Plain Pavek was wrong about his former colleagues in the civil bureau.

Akashia believed with all her heart that the chronic aches and illnesses of Urik's common folk were important enough to justify the risks she was taking. She believed, too, that her mind-bending skills coupled with druidry would be sufficient to protect her, her companions, and the three amphorae nestled in the straw-filled cart Yohan pulled.

When she called her spells and her skills across her mind's eye, her confidence grew; then something would catch her attention at the side of the road or she'd see the shadow of Just-Plain Pavek lurking in the corner of her memory, and her calm would shatter.

In her heart she believed Pavek was wrong about Urik's need for zarneeka and Ral's Breath but, try as she might as she walked, she couldn't convince herself that he was lying about the city's danger or the procurer's duplicity. Grandmother had agreed that Pavek spoke what he fervently believed was the truth. He was transparent in so many ways to both mind-bending and druidry; he'd never make a master of either craft—yet he could evoke the guardian and, somehow, he'd managed to enter Ruari's grove after Ruari had hidden himself inside it.

She thought *she* could have found her young friend's grove and forced herself inside, but by every reckoning she and Grandmother had made, the challenge should have been far beyond Just-Plain Pavek's abilities... Unless Ruari had welcomed him, in which case one of them might have slain the other, or—worse to consider—the two of them might have discovered that, where zarneeka and Urik were concerned, they were of like minds.

And that would have been the end of the zarneeka trade: Yohan would have stood with them. And the remaining Quraiters, druid and farmer alike, were already more afraid of Urik and Urik's inhuman king than was necessary; they would have supported the recalcitrant trio. Quraite wasn't some idyllic community where everyone's opinion counted with equal weight and the heaviest position prevailed; such communities rarely survived a year, much less the generations that Quraite itself had endured. Grandmother's word naturally and rightfully outweighed everyone else's, but Grandmother would never be foolish enough to drag the community in a direction it absolutely did not want to go.

As she was dragging Yohan to Urik.

The old dwarf trod silently between the traces of the handcart. He'd resisted her attempts at conversation since they left Quraite. Yohan had spoken vehemently against Grandmother's decision to dispatch zarneeka to Urik while Pavek and Ruari were still hidden in Ruari's grove. But in the end, Yohan had swallowed his objections. He'd helped to separate the zarneeka powder from the sand in the ruins of the stowaway. When Grandmother invoked a diminutive whirlwind to whip up the gritty mixture, he'd held a winnowing against it until his feet were buried in grit. She'd

stood behind the sieve with a tightly woven basket, collecting enough yellow powder to fill three amphorae. And then he'd harnessed the kanks—all the while looking over his shoulder at the path Ruari and Pavék would have taken if they had returned together.

But the path remained empty, and they'd left the village before sunset without knowing what had happened between the templar and the half-elf—exactly as Grandmother had wanted it.

Because Grandmother *was* wiser than all the rest of them together. And Grandmother *knew* the right thing for Quraite to do where zarneeka or anything else was concerned.

"You'll see," Akashia assured her plodding, sullen companion. "Everything will fall into place. You'll be headed home before sundown, I promise. There's nothing to worry about. There won't be any trouble at the customhouse—"

"Not there, not the customhouse," he interrupted, the longest single string of words he'd put together since they left Quraite. "It's too risky. If your heart's still set on delivering zarneeka to Urik, I'd sooner take it to the elven market I'd sooner trust a cross-eyed elf than that hairy dwarf at the customhouse."

"The elven market?" Her mind filled with the wonders she imagined among its tawdry tents and shanties. She'd heard about the market from the Moonracers since she was a little girl, but in all her fifteen trips to Urik—she'd kept careful count—she'd never done more than trek from the gate to the customhouse and back again. Except, of course, this past time when they'd encountered Pavék, and Yohan had led them to the dyers' plaza where lengths of brightly colored cloth had threatened more than once to distract her from the interrogation.

Any excuse to visit the elven market was an almost irresistible temptation—especially if cautious Yohan was suggesting it.

Then the imagined wonders faded: "We gave our names to the Modekan registrar..."

“Three itinerant peddlers with trade for the customhouse,” Yohan recited in rhythm with his walking.

Yohan had been trekking the zarneeka to Urik since before she was born. He’d taught her what to do and say, and she never told the truth about their names or merchandise to the village registrar. “They won’t suspect? Won’t come looking for us?” He shrugged; the amphorae shifted in the cart. “Not in the elven market. Templars don’t go into the market, not alone. We’ll be on our way home, like you said, before they start looking for us. *If* they start looking for us.”

She pondered temptation for a little while. The dazzling yellow walls—cleaned and replastered after the Tyr-storm—lifted up in front of them, the freshly repainted portraits of the Lion-King were blurred, but colorful at this distance. The great, dark opening of the gate was visible as well, and the road was still empty ahead of them. There wouldn’t be a line. Elven market or customhouse, they’d be into the city and out again in record time.

But the inspectors would ask questions. She had to be ready to use a mind-bender’s subtle art, and that meant she had to have her words and images memorized before they reached the gate.

“Are you certain?” she asked.

“Nothing’s certain—except that Pavek knows the procurer we’ve traded with. Whatever truth Pavek’s telling us, I don’t want to come face-to-face with that procurer until we’re sure what’s already happened and what’s likely to happen next. That hairy dwarf’s got muck all over his hands; he’s not to be misted. That much is certain.”

Of all the races, dwarves were the most consciously proud, of their appearance. Yohan’s distrust of the procurer had its roots in the disgust he undoubtedly felt each time they stood before that stained yellow robe. Under different circumstances, she would have discounted her companion’s advice for that very reason. Today’s circumstances were as different as they could be, but she made one more attempt to resist temptation.

“Grandmother wants us to learn about the purity and strength of Ral’s Breath. We’ll have to visit the customhouse anyway—”

Yohan spat into the dust at the side of the road. “Wouldn’t trust a customhouse templar’s answer to that question, no matter who or what he was. We’ve got to visit an apothecary or two ourselves, Kashi, if we want to take those answers back with us.”

“Will there be apothecaries in the elven market? Will there be anyone?” she asked suddenly. “The Moonracers said they’d withdrawn—”

Another wet splatter marked the dust. “Elves! It’s not their market, just the only place where they can set up to trade. Get rid of the tribes and the market will be a little cleaner, a little safer, that’s all. There’s a little of everything in the market, including apothecaries, licensed and otherwise. The rest will come looking for us as soon as we’ve talked to the first. That’s the way of the market. We can buy and sell at the same time. I’ll do the talking.”

She twisted a thick lock of brown hair around her fingers, thinking her way through a tangle of doubts. “If we sell zarneeka in the market, we’ve got to tell them how to dilute it with flour to make Ral’s Breath.”

The portraits of Urik’s master had grown larger, clearer as they walked. Hamanu’s robes were a brilliant sapphire blue. The glass orbs of his eyes flashed with reflected sunlight, looking straight at her. Or so it seemed.

“We’ve never done that. We’re not supposed to do it. We trade zarneeka to the Lion-King’s templars and the Lion-King sells Ral’s Breath to Urik; that’s the way it’s always been, Yohan. If something goes wrong —”

“Nothing’s going to go wrong. We’ll buy and sell and be gone. If the Ral’s Breath we buy is as bitter as it’s supposed to be, we know where the liar is. We can deal with him when we get back to Quraite and then come back to Urik at our regular time, same as before, with no one the wiser. If Pavek’s told us the truth and what we buy is no good—well, Grandmother can decide what we do next.

Curled hair slipped off her fingertips. “Going to the elven market will be safer than going to the customhouse?”

“Remember: *I’ll* do the talking.”

“Once we get inside the gate,” Akashia corrected; she was the mind-bender. Dealing with templars was her responsibility.

They approached the inspectors and regulators gathered outside the gatehouse. A yellow-robed pair harassed a merchant while the rest idled in the shade. New laws, regulations, and rewards for wanted criminals were written in red on the gatehouse wall, as usual, a list of warnings and enticements for anyone who dared to read them. She stole a glance while they waited for someone to give them the onceover. Pavék’s name was still written there, still wanted for unspecified crimes against his city. The letters were fading, though, and the price on his head had not risen.

A weary-looking yellow-robed woman left the shade. She asked the usual questions; Akashia stared directly into her eyes as she answered them.

“We have trade today in the elven market.” She kept her voice low and even. “The seals on our goods are all in order. We’re no different than anyone else who’s come through the gate today. You can think of no other questions worth asking.”

The templar blinked and rubbed her eyes as if she’d suddenly acquired a headache, which was possible, though Akashia had had no difficulty planting her notions in the woman’s unimaginative mind.

“May we enter the city?” she asked after a moment.

The woman nodded. The Quraiters each dirtied their thumbs in a bowl of waxy ink and left a unique impression on the tattered scrap of parchment the templars were using for today’s tally-strip.

“Don’t forget: Come back through here before sundown, or you’ll owe six bits each, and ten for the cart.”

She smiled. Several shade-hugging inspectors whistled through their teeth. One offered to pay her poll-tax if she’d wait for him beside the Yaramuke fountain at sunset. She kept walking, never flinching or missing a step, and the whistling stopped before they reached the massive gates. The farmers gawked with their faces pointed skyward. She had to call them by their true names to get their attention and keep them close to the cart as they entered the always-crowded, always-busy streets.

They smelled the market before she saw it: a dizzying blend of spicy delicacies floating atop the sharper scents of natron, pitch, and artisans' charcoal fires, and, of course, the ever-present sweet aromas of decay.

Yohan paused on the cobblestone verge of the market. He adjusted his grip on the cart traces and looked at each of the farmers before letting his stare come to rest on her.

"Stay close," he warned them all. "If you've got to look for something, look for a signboard of a striding lion with a pestle. That's the apothecaries' license we're looking for."

"What about unlicensed—"

Yohan cut her short with a slash of his finger. "The difference between licensed and unlicensed doesn't show on the signboard. Remember: stay close."

And they did. She wrapped her hand lightly around one of the traces; that gave her more freedom to look for a pestle—it seemed that every hawker's sign displayed a striding lion—as they wandered the market. Traders hailed them from every ramshackle doorway of cloth, wood, or bone. Bold, ragged children begged for ceramic bits or offered to sell pieces of bruised fruit obviously scavenged from the gutters of Urik's more reputable markets. One child leapt into the cart and grabbed two handfuls of straw before she and the farmers could chase him away.

"What's wrong with them? Are they *that* hungry? Should we offer them something?" she whispered anxiously to Yohan.

"Stay close," was his only reply, repeated through clenched teeth as the raids became more frequent.

Every dwelling or stall in the elven market seemed equally old, equally dilapidated and despairing. There were no signposts for the streets that met at odd angles and irregular intervals. Had she not heeded Yohan's warning and kept close to the cart, she'd have been quickly and hopelessly lost. The tumult of noise and color, so attractive in her imagination, grew less so when it devolved into hostile stares and furtive bent-mind probes of her inmost thoughts.

She was unprepared for that Unseen onslaught from anonymous minds. In her previous visits to the city, she'd dealt only with templars—broken, mean-spirited individuals, each and every one of them, but, by their master's order, untrained in the arts of the Unseen Way.

No stray curiosity or inquiry penetrated the defenses she'd learned from Telhami, but time and time again she caught an unwelcome glimpse into another mind. The imaginations of those who dwelt in the elven market were as foul as the sewer channel in the middle of the so-called street they followed.

The market was not her grove; the confidence she'd felt when Telhami upbraided her about the dangers a city-man like Pavek posed to any solitary woman evaporated like morning dew. Her grip on the cart trace progressed from feather-light to a panicky clench.

One of the farmers shouted that his knife had been stolen. He plunged toward a twisted alley, determined to catch the culprit. Yohan intervened quickly, hauling the farmer back to the cart and staring down the hard-faced denizens who swarmed out of nowhere, ready to support the thief, not them.

"Nothing happened," Yohan assured me grumbling mob.

"But my—" the poor farmer wailed, until Yohan pinched his wrist to quiet him.

"Everybody, move on." Yohan used a commanding tone she'd never heard from him before.

"We ought not have come here," she whispered.

He replied with a grunt that could have meant anything at all, then pivoted the cart sharply on its left wheel. They went down a rubbish-strewn alley to the lion-and-pestle signboard he'd somehow spotted during the fracas.

"Wait here," he told the farmers. "Sing out if anything happens."

His hand on her arm guided her into a dusty shop. The proprietor, a human woman of indeterminate age, pushed away from a table covered with fortune-telling cards. The long red gown she wore might once have belonged to a wealthy woman, but the silk embroidery threads had been

plucked out and now the lush floral patterns were mere dots and holes across the cloth.

“What’s your pleasure?” she asked with a voice coarsened by too much wine and too little fresh air.

“You need to ask?” Yohan gestured toward the fortune-telling cards.

Akashia recognized the ritualized rudeness that passed for civility in the city. She used the style herself with the yellow-robcs. It didn’t bother her, or it hadn’t until Just-Plain Pavek became a man in her mind, not a templar. And it bothered her even more with this woman who, on second glance, was only a few years older than she was herself. But the shop was filled with magic-laced things she could not name and the air itself was thick with Unseen inquiries; she held her peace, staying close by Yohan.

The proprietor lifted her shoulders in a worn-out shrug: “A love philter?”

“Ral’s Breath.” Yohan’s arm dropped quickly from hers; the old dwarf was embarrassed.

“You’ve come to the wrong place, then. Never sold the baby powders; never will.” And staring bluntly at Akashia’s belly, the woman let out a snorting, bitter and private chuckle. “Good luck. You’ll need it.”

“Why?” Akashia asked, disregarding Yohan’s admonition that she be quiet while they were in the shops.

“You won’t find any, that’s why. It’s gone. Old Breath, new Breath, good and bad: it’s all gone. Sold or confiscated by the yellow-robcs.”

“Confiscated?”

“Where’ve you been, girl? S’been weeks since the orators harangued that the stuff’d been tampered with.” She swore and wiped a weepy nose against a dirty sleeve. “Never worked much anyway, ’cept with babies and old men. But it’s gone now.”

“Would you like some?” she asked gently.

Yohan’s fist clamped over her elbow like a vise.

“S’ all been confiscated. Ain’t none left in the city. You got some, you keep it far and away from me. Don’t carry no stuff from the rotted-yellow customhouse. Don’t want no rotted yellow-robes bustin’ in here, roustin’ me outta house and home.”

The woman took a deep breath, staring at the single roof-beam of her establishment. Aware of her own foolishness—treating a vendor of the elven market as if she were a woman of Quraite—Akashia tightened her mind-bending defenses. But the woman was no master of the Unseen Way; her vacant expression was the product of a Tyr-storm of wildly suspicious thoughts whipping through her mind.

“You bringin’ me trouble?” she shouted. Her eyes were sharp-focused now, and filled with rage and madness. “You settin’ the yellow-robes on me? You wantin’ my place, my trade?” She swore and stalked forward, head down and shoulders raised. “I’ll give you trouble. I’ll give you more trouble than you dreamed—”

The hysterical woman came toward Akashia, Yohan sidestepped between them before harm was done.

“No trouble,” he insisted, retreating with cautious, well-balanced strides, pushing her back toward the curtain door.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized as soon as they were both in the alley.

The red-dressed woman’s shouts quieted to inarticulate muttering, but they could still hear her moving through her shop. Fingers with ragged nails appeared at the edges of the curtain, pulling it taut, lashing it to the flimsy frame.

“Go away! Go away, you hear! Take your trouble somewhere else!”

The Quraiters were eager to obey. Yohan grabbed the cart traces and, without saying a word, started for the street. Once they were milling through the crowds, Akashia insisted softly, “It was my fault,”

Yohan pursed his lips together and adjusted his grip on the traces. He was as angry as she’d ever seen him, and angry at her as well—which, she knew, was an anger he found difficult to express.

“I’m ashamed of myself.” She said the things she thought he’d want to say, that she needed to hear. “I was wrong. I made a terrible mistake, thinking because she was my age, she was like me—”

“Don’t talk, that’s all,” Yohan grumbled. “Let me do the talking. *All* the talking.”

“I won’t forget again,” she assured him. “We learned something, though. The Lion-King’s confiscated the remaining Ral’s Breath. He must know it’s been tampered with. Pavek’s—”

“There’s no ‘must’ with Urik or the lion. We don’t know anything, yet.”

They went along in stony silence awhile, until she spotted the distinctive signboard slung out over a cross street.

“Do we try there?” she asked. “I’ll be quiet, I swear it.”

“See to it,” Yohan replied with the same sternness he’d used in the earlier street confrontation.

Then, after rolling the cart from the street to a less-trafficked alley and leaving the two farmers to stand guard beside it, he led her into the apothecary’s shop.

This second proprietor was an elf, lean and shifty as any lifelong desert nomad, and clear-headed, as the red-dressed woman had not been. His establishment was better stocked, with neat shelves full of bowls and boxes, each labeled with a picture of its contents and the symptoms those contents were purported to relieve. One smallish box bore one picture of a yawning moon and another of a crying baby with an oversized tooth. She nudged Yohan gently and made arrowlike movements with her eyes to direct his attention to the proper place. He acknowledged with a deliberate blink.

Yohan and the elfen proprietor observed all the rude forms of Urikite conversation. They traded smooth insults and sly insinuations, but the result was the same: the apothecary had no Ral’s Breath in stock—the box she’d noticed was, in his words ‘as empty as our Lord Hamanu’s tomb.’ And the elf was adamantly uninterested in purchasing anything they might have to offer.

“Too much trouble,” he insisted. “If you’re in pain, go to a sawbones healer, or buy yourself something that works—” He gestured toward a shelf of amber bottles, each labeled with a sleeping or smiling face.

“And that doesn’t attract too much attention?” Yohan inquired.

“That’s always wise, isn’t it? Who but a fool wants to attract attention?”

Yohan pointed at the empty Ral’s Breath box. “A fool with a baby that’s cutting a tooth? There’ll always be mothers with babies, and always the fathers who provide them. How does a licensed apothecary meet the demand when yellow-robe scum take away his goods?”

It seemed for a heartbeat that the elf was going to give them a useful answer, then shouts erupted outside. Akashia instantly recognized the distressed voices of the Quraite farmers and feared the worst. The elf didn’t know about the farmers or the loaded cart they guarded, but he came to the same conclusion.

“Get out!” he demanded and took one threatening step toward them and the door before clapping his hands hard against the sides of his head.

She felt the mind-bending assault too: a burning agony that lanced her eyes and roared in her ears. It threatened to engulf every mote of knowledge and identity in her mind, but it was not the worst she’d encountered: when Grandmother taught the Unseen Way she hadn’t pulled her punches. After an eyeblink of monsters from the mind-bender’s nightmares, Akashia successfully wrapped herself in a fortress of peace. The attack beat harmlessly against her defenses, which, in the nature of the Unseen Way, formed an invisible sphere around her body that extended to Yohan and the apothecary, both of whom had fallen to the floor in screaming terror.

The power of an Unseen attack was such that the invading images summoned up the victim’s direst memories that continued to wreak their havoc after the mind-bender had withdrawn. Akashia had thrown up her fortress before the invasion took root; she cast out the mind-bender’s repulsive images one by one.

Yohan's lesser defenses had been overwhelmed. His mind radiated gore—a gathering of dwarves cut down and mutilated by mounted soldiers—until she pinched the bridge of his nose. His thoughts righted themselves quickly and he caught her hand before she could administer a similar mercy to the writhing elf.

“No time! Which way? Where's it coming from?”

She swung her mind's attention from the visible world to the Unseen one where an evil drone echoed everywhere. No matter what she did, she couldn't localize the attack, which was continuing. “I—I don't know. It's everywhere—” Then another, more horrible thought rose from her own imagination. “We're surrounded.”

“We've got to try—” Yohan towed her toward the door. “Maybe they're not looking for us.”

But she knew, as soon as he said the words, that the attack had been directed at them—even though it caught the apothecary and a dozen street-side passersby in its net. And the Quraite farmers, as well. They'd both collapsed beside the cart. Blood seeped from the nose, mouth, and ears of the man who'd lost his knife. Akashia touched him lightly and withdrew. His life essence had been driven out; there was nothing she could do for him.

The other farmer was still alive, but his mind remained empty after she banished the ravening beasts of his nightmares. His sense of self might come back of its own, given enough time—but there wasn't any time at all. Luckless city-dwellers lay on the ground, a few of them bleeding like the first farmer, the others wailing in their misery as the attack continued.

A ragged, half-grown boy crouched warily a short step away from one of the fallen passersby. He reached for the coin purse looped over the man's belt and suffered no ill-effects until, in trying to tug it free, his head and shoulders leaned forward. Then he collapsed with a shriek. She thought he might roll free, but in an instant the mind-bending attack had paralyzed him and he was as helpless as the others. Still she knew how to defeat the assault.

“We can get away.” She grappled with the living, but mindless farmer, trying to lift him into the zarneeka cart. “The attack’s a sphere that’s held right here. If we can get outside it—”

Yohan pulled her away from the farmer and the cart. “No time,” he snarled. “Is he still attacking?”

“He?” She listened with her mind’s ears and heard the strident drone still battering futilely against her defenses.

“He. She. What difference does it make? Is it continuing?”

“Yes. The same as before. I can’t tell where it’s coming from. It still seems to be coming from everywhere at once.”

“Then it doesn’t matter where we go.” Yohan kept a firm left-side grip on her wrist, to keep them together and remain within the protective sphere of the mind-bending defenses she maintained. He scanned the streets and shadows beyond the apothecary. They were empty now, except for those Urikites unfortunate enough to get caught in the attack. She guessed that even the scroungers had fled once they saw the boy collapse. She thought their chances for escape were good and tried to pull back to the cart.

“Forget them. Stay close. You’re what’s important,” he snarled. “He’s out there,” the dwarf said more softly, making a slow study of the nearest rooftops. “I can feel him.”

She believed him; sometimes an individual with a wild mind-bending talent could do things, discern enemies, that a trained mind could not. They moved carefully among the stricken Urikites until they crossed an unseen boundary and the drone, but not Yohan’s wariness, diminished.

“Hide us,” he commanded as they sneaked around one corner, then another.

But hiding in Urik was not like hiding in Quraite. There was no guardian to invoke or familiar lands in which to lose themselves. She could use the Unseen Way to trick another mind into not seeing what was right before his or her eyes. But mind-bending was all illusion and completely dependent on her ability to find the one or many who were attacking them. She tried again to trace the attack to its source, now that they were beyond

its range—and encountered a defensive barrier as strong as Telhami's and darker than she'd imagined that anything could be.

Nothing she knew would pierce the mind-bender's defense or insert an illusion behind it. She wasn't even certain how far away the mind-bender was. Though if he—now that Yohan had planted the notion in *her* head, it seemed to Akashia that the attack had had a distinctly masculine aura—was not physically nearby, then he was that much more skilled, that much stronger.

And the mind-bender's presence didn't lessen as they walked through the market, trying not to attract attention.

"We're being followed." She said, with real fear in her heart and voice. "Watched."

They were deep in the elven market now, alongside the towering yellow walls in an area where nomadic elves hoisted their tents for the days or weeks they spent inside Urik. When the Moonracers—the only nomad tribe Akashia knew by name or sight—visited Quraite, they were courteous guests, welcomed with feasting, singing, and dancing. Here in the market, though the clothes and colors were familiar, the faces were unfriendly, even cruel.

If someone was following or watching them, Akashia assumed they'd get no help here where suspicion was rampant and no one seemed interested in offering a helping hand. But, once again, she was wrong about the mysterious city and its residents. Yohan approached a sullen elf who had beads and metal braided into his long, straw-colored hair and a brace of curved obsidian knives stuck through the striped cloth that served as his belt.

"The door?" Yohan asked while making intricate movements with his hands.

Her eyes widened, and so did the elf's, revealing a glimmer of cooperation. She thought that they'd found help, hoped and prayed that they'd found it. But he cocked his head, like a jozhal sniffing the wind; he was kenning her with the Unseen Way and sensed both her defenses and the attack that caused her to raise them.

“Sundown,” he said with a semblance of regret. “Come back at sundown and it will be opened. Live that long, my friend, and return.”

He held the first two fingers of his right hand against his chin, a gesture that conveyed silence and respect and something more that she could not interpret. Then he took a step backward and quickly disappeared into the maze of tents. “What was that?”

Yohan muttered under his breath before answering: “An old debt. Very old. But debts have to be paid, Kashi. Never forget that. We can collect at sundown.”

“He called *you friend*.” Friendship was not casual among elves, especially nomadic tribes. “Who was he?”

“Never met him before.”

He started back the way they’d come. Their enemy hadn’t given up. The sense that they were being watched or followed lingered throughout a long, frustrating afternoon. It ebbed occasionally—Yohan could walk in her protection without holding her hand—and intensified when they tried to return to the alley where they’d abandoned the cart and their companion. She fretted with guilt about the farmer, but, the dark pressure against her defenses never let up completely, and she understood that there were rescues she didn’t dare attempt.

And there were those she had to plan immediately.

“If he attacks again, you must get away,” she told Yohan when they were resting behind a sausager’s oven.

“No—”

“I’m serious, Yohan. Absolutely serious. Whoever is after us—” In her mind she’d begun identify the mind-bender as the templar Pavek had named Elabon Escrissar, the man who’d put a price on Pavek’s head, the man who turned their zarneeka into Laq “—whoever he is, he’s a mind-bender. A powerful mind-bender. He’d get Quraite out of you, Yohan; you know that. But I can keep the secret—to the death, if I have to.”

“Kashi—”

“I can. I must. I will. And you must get back to Quraite. You were right all along. Pavek is right; the Moonracers are right. This *is* about Laq, about a deadly poison and a madman—two madmen: Elabon Escrissar and that halfling alchemist. It’s not about zarneeka or Ral’s Breath. I should have listened. We should have stayed away. You must warn Grandmother. You must tell her to protect Quraite.”

Yohan stared into the heat waves shimmering above the oven. “I’d sooner die than leave you, Kashi.”

“No—”

The word slipped out as a sigh, but she knew, from way he’d said the words that the suspicions she’d had since childhood were, indeed, true. Yohan’s dwarven focus wasn’t his devotion to Quraite or his devotion to Grandmother and the other druids. It was devotion to her and her alone. She’d become the center of his life. Whatever happened to her, he took it as his personal guilt. If she *died*, Yohan was doomed to the half-life of a banshee, haunting the wastelands forever because he’d failed to protect the one thing above all others that was important to him.

“Then we must return to Quraite together.”

He clapped her once on the knee before rising again to his feet, a signal that their rest was done and it was time to start moving again. “That, we must.”

\* \* \*

The sun descended, growing as large as the bulging dome tower atop King Hamanu’s palace and glowing like fresh-spilled blood. Yohan, whose sense of direction had never faltered, returned them to the nomad encampment alongside the walls. They were both exhausted, and Akashia’s mind still rang with a mind-bender’s probe, but she allowed herself to believe that they would escape through whatever door the austere elf would provide. And once they were out of Urik, she had no doubt that they could make their way safely to Quraite.

She wasn't foolish enough to think that the danger was past, but her breath came easier, and there was new strength in her legs.

The elf with straw-colored braids was nowhere to be seen when they entered the tent-covered expanse between the market and the wall. She turned to ask Yohan a question and caught a flicker of movement among the tents. Her eyes alone saw nothing untoward: the encampment was crowded. There were movements everywhere. But her mind's eye, made a vigilant pan of her defenses by the Unseen Way, had seen a smear of templar yellow. Not the color of the walls, but the more garish color worn every day by every templar and that, coupled with the continued mind-bending pressure against her defenses, was not to be ignored.

She shook Yohan's wrist and pointed to the place where her mind said the yellow had appeared and disappeared. "Danger!"

Yohan swept her behind him and stood chin-out, facing the tents, ready for whatever fate blew their way. A fast heartbeat later the ugliest, hairiest dwarf she'd ever seen—the procurer to whom they usually traded their zarneeka—marched purposefully into sight.

"It's over," the procurer announced without drawing a weapon. "Give up quietly. You've brought a forbidden commodity into the city. There's a fine to be paid, and a few questions to be answered. Nothing serious—if you come quietly."

Yohan answered by spreading his feet and standing firm. "Run, Kashi," he added softly. "I can take care of this one."

But she stayed where she was. The procurer was dressed in a rumpled robe of regulation color, he was the smear of yellow her mind's eye had seen, but he wasn't the source of the mind-bending probes.

"There's another one, the mind-bender. You'll lose your protection if too much distance comes between us."

"I'll stand. You run."

Run where? she wanted to ask. He was the one who knew Urik's secrets and he was the one to whom the elf had promised a door...

If the elf hadn't just turned around and sold them to the highest bidder.

The whole question became moot a moment later when a second figure emerged from the tent maze: a human woman, powerfully built, and dressed in templar yellow. Her right arm, naked from the shoulder down, was covered with a bizarre tangle of serpentine tattoos.

“You run,” Akashia whispered into Yohan’s ear. “Run all the way to Grandmother.”

He didn’t budge a step as the hairy dwarf and tattooed woman advanced. The elves of the encampment saw trouble brewing and made themselves scarce.

“I’ll manage to protect you until you can hide,” she whispered urgently. “Run!”

“Protect us both.”

“I can’t. Find your ‘friend.’ Use the ‘door.’ Debts must be paid.” She gave Yohan a shove in the small of his back, nothing that could ordinarily move a man of his brawn and determination. “I’m sorry, Yohan. I’m sorry in my heart that I brought you here, but you have to go. One of us *has* to get back to Quraite. Don’t look back and *don’t* believe what I send.” She kissed the top of his bald head, breathing out a bit of spellcraft as she did, though she was far from Quraite and her druidry was weak. She hoped to give him some protection from the attack she intended to make, but mostly she wanted him to run away.

Yohan shifted his balance and began to move. He took a few heavy-footed, short-legged strides before the other dwarf gave chase. The woman could have caught Yohan, but she’d never have brought him down; she came after Akashia instead.

Akashia counted three beats of her pounding heart then, holding back only the wherewithal to sequester Quraite’s secrets deep within her memory, launched an all-out mind-bending assault of her own. The creatures of all the nightmares she remembered shot across the void and into the imagination of any mind close enough to receive them and not trained to resist them.

Her last conscious thoughts were for Yohan's safety and escape, then she surrendered completely to the darkest corners of her imagination. She let out hatred, fear, and vengeance: every malicious thought she'd ever had and repressed—exactly as Grandmother had told her she'd have to do if she came to a moment like this, when everything important was at stake.

And even though she risked losing herself forever in the dark.

\* \* \*

Akashia regained consciousness in a room filled with sweet incense and soft voices. A lightweight linen sheet covered her from feet to shoulders; the air against her face was cool. Night had almost certainly fallen, and she had almost certainly fallen into the hands of the tattooed woman, the ugly dwarf, and the mind-bender, Elabon Escrissar—the very enemies Pavek had warned them about.

“Pavek's enemies, not yours. Not yet,” a smooth, masculine voice replied, by which she understood that Escrissar was a powerful mind-bender, indeed.

Akashia opened her eyes. The mind-bender wasn't wearing the black mask and robe Pavek had described. In plain, pale domes, he was simply a bland-looking man, a half-elf by birth and radiantly evil by temperament. A scarred halfling stood to one side, neither smiling nor scowling: the alchemist responsible for Laq. There was no sign of the ugly dwarf or the tattooed woman, but there was a dark-haired boy by the open door of the small, luxurious room where they'd brought her.

The boy smiled when he caught her looking at him. It was a smile that made Akashia's blood freeze in her heart.

“I do not want to be your enemy, dear lady. Pavek was born a thick-skulled idiot; he'll be a sorry hero. But not you. You understand. You've held power yourself. You have ambitions.”

He came up the shadowed, twisted pathways she had blasted through her defenses, through her very self. All silk and seduction, he touched the

tender, aching places of her mind, of her body, offering her things she had scarcely imagined before this horrifying moment.

She drew a shuddering breath, closed her eyes, and fought with all her might to throw him out.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Pavek's days had assumed a different routine while Akashia was gone. He still went to Telhami's grove every other day—they scrupulously avoided certain subjects of conversation: zarneeka, Urik, Laq, and Akashia, herself. But on the day between, he carried a hoe into the fields and worked with the farmers. The back-breaking work gave him time to think about the lessons Telhami gave him, and the subjects they did not discuss. Thinking was good for his incipient druidry: he could wring water out of the air now, on demand and without a headache, but as the empty days of Akashia's absence began outnumber his fingers, his mood darkened.

He hoed his rows in the fields alone and kept to himself the rest of the time, even taking his roll of blankets from the bachelor's hut to the fields, where he slept under starlight: a remarkable change of habit, he knew, for a man who, at the start of Descending Sun, had been unable to imagine himself beyond walls.

Aside from Telhami, only one person intruded on his enforced solitude: Ruari.

They had not become fast-friends after they returned from the youth's grove, although Pavek had stood firm, in his brawly templar way, for the half-elf's right to rejoin the community then and there. Remembering himself at Ruari's I age, Pavek reckoned that he'd saddled the boy with too great a debt and was content to let him keep his distance. Besides, the half-witted scum *was* a whiner, and a complainer; and Pavek, veteran of the orphanage and the civil bureau, had no patience for either trait.

He looked up from his hoeing and saw Ruari waiting for him at the end of the row—the row he'd intended as his last row of the day, unless he showed Ruari his back now and kept working until the scum gave up and left. But he'd let Ruari catch his eye, which was all the invitation Ruari required.

“Go away, scum,” he said when a long, lean shadow touched his feet. It was a polite, even friendly, greeting among templars.

“You beat me up bad. I couldn’t fight you off. I want to learn how.”

“Keep your mouth shut.” He offered the advice he’d heard and ignored many times before. “That way you won’t start so many fights you can’t finish.”

“I don’t start fights,” Ruari snapped, giving the lie to his words with the tone of his voice. “They just happen. Maybe if I won once in a while, I wouldn’t have so many.”

A vagrant laugh slipped into Pavek’s mouth. He clamped a hand over his chin to contain it.

“Wind and fire! Why’re you laughing? What’s so funny?”

Ruari took a swing at him, which Pavek blocked with his forearm. The hoe slid off his shoulder and landed in the dirt. The scum was quick; Pavek would grant him that Too quick. Once he was riled, Ruari whipped up the air with his fists, landing blows that were little more than love-taps, and leaving himself vulnerable to the powerful punch of an admittedly slower, far-more-massive opponent. But instead of a punch, Pavek reached through Ruari’s guard, grabbed shirt and skin, and lifted him off the ground.

“You’ve got two arms, scum. Two fists. Keep one of ’em at home for yourself.”

“That’s what Yohan always says.”

“Listen to him.” Pavek let go, and Ruari landed lightly and easily on the balls of his feet. “He’s a good teacher.”

“He’s not here—”

“Just go away, scum.”

“I want to learn from you. Aren’t you impressed? Flattered?” The whine was back in Ruari’s voice; it grated in Pavek’s ears, “I think you’re better than the old dwarf. Me—the half-wit scum who hates all rotted, yellow-robe templars, and tried to poison you—I want you to teach me how to fight.”

There was a fading bruise on Ruari's chin, another on his arm, and a third, larger, one across his chest, visible through the open neck of his shirt, all souvenirs of their last encounter. Pavek picked up the hoe with a display of hostility that made Ruari dance back a pace or two and hoist his fists again. But he was only teasing, not taking bait. He dug into the dirt where Ruari had been standing.

The boy realized he'd been gulled. "Pavek—?"

He broke up a clod of dirt with the blade of the hoe and threw a handful of weeds over his shoulder onto the barren ground beyond the irrigated fields. Ruari's shadow didn't move, and neither did his mouth, for a pleasant change. Another long, silent moment passed. Pavek kicked the blade into the ground, then he headed out of the field. With a wave of his fingers, he invited Ruari to join him.

"Show me what you've got," he said, and the half-elf bobbed on his toes, with his slender arms and fists in front of him.

Swearing under his breath, Pavek shook his head and turned away. "You'll never be a brawler, Ru." He retrieved his hoe. "Now try it," he said, tossing the bone-shafted tool at the youth, who caught it deftly.

Everyone in the Tablelands had to know enough about fighting to defend him—or herself. Gender didn't matter much, either in the cities or the wastelands: if you didn't look like you could fight back, the full run of predators and scavengers took note. Quraite was protected land, but common sense said the guardian would better protect those who showed the inclination to protect themselves. Pavek had watched the Quraiters, farmers and druids alike, training one day in ten with bows and ordinary tools like the hoe Ruari held in front of him, one hand circling the shaft in a sun-wise direction, the other going the counter-way.

Pavek assessed the youth quickly and coldly, the way he himself had been taught. Then, instead of exploiting the weaknesses he saw—of which there were remarkably few (Yohan was a good trainer, Ruari's failings were rooted in his personality, not his technique)—he tried to correct them.

They went at it through the dying light of another arid afternoon, swapping the hoe and the attack. One of two things usually happened when

a man tried to teach another the finer aspects of fighting: one man got angry, the lesson ended, and a serious brawl erupted, or they found a common rhythm and the seeds of equal friendship were planted.

With the bloated sun in his eyes and the hoe in his hands, Pavek fainted to his right side, drawing Ruari's attack. Then he swung the hoe low above the ground, letting the sweat-polished shaft slide through his fingers until the angled blade was smack against his wrists. The tactic was designed to strike an enemy's shins and sweep him off his feet; the minimal countermeasure was a leap into the air to avoid the swinging shaft. Gladiators executed the technique with a variety of weapons. Pavek had learned it in the orphanage.

He *wasn't* trying to seriously injure anyone; he expected Ruari to know the countermeasure. The half-wit *should* have known it, either from Yohan or from those interminable skirmishes with his elven cousins, but he leapt much too late. The shaft caught him just above the ankles, and he tumbled forward with a howl of pain. Pavek centered himself over his feet, prepared for an explosion of rage.

"You're supposed to *jump*, not trip over your own big, baazrag feet," he said, trying to make light of what he knew—from personal experience—was a very painful moment, and hoping, as the moments lengthened, that the silent, huddled-up youth wasn't nursing broken bones.

"Now you tell me," Ruari finally replied in a choked, quavery voice. His face was pale when he looked up, but he did a hero's work trying to laugh. "You're supposed to be my teacher."

Pavek lowered the hoe and extended a hand. "Sorry, scum—didn't think you were that stupid. Can you stand?"

Ruari nodded, but took the help that was offered. He held onto Pavek's wrist an extra moment while he took a few hobbling steps.

"Men," a woman grumbled from not too far away. "Never too old for child's play."

They both turned toward the sound. Ruari gasped: "Grandmother," and dropped Pavek's wrist as though it were ringed with fire. There was no

guessing how long she'd been watching them, no reading her purpose through her hat's gauzy veil.

"Yohan's coming back. He's on the Sun's Fist."

"Alone?" Pavek snaked an arm around Ruari's shoulder before Telhami answered, ready to restrain the boy, if the answer was what he suddenly feared it would be.

"Alone," she admitted, and for a heartbeat that broad-brimmed hat seemed to shake and shrink.

Ruari surged on wobbly ankles. Pavek caught him before he shamed himself with a fall.

"Easy. If he's on the salt, we've got time, don't we?" He imagined meeting the eyes behind the veil and making them blink. "You don't already know what went wrong?"

"No," her voice was barely audible. "I know that he's alone, nothing more. I've come to you, before the others. You've a right."

She turned away and, gripping her staff in a white-knuckled fist, began the long walk to the village and her hut. Pavek almost felt sorry for her, except: "You sent them! You wouldn't listen, not to me, not to your guardian. You thought your zarneeka was more important, and that you were so much smarter, wiser. Damn you, Telhami, this falls on you!"

Telhami's form shimmered and vanished.

"You shouldn't've said that, Pavek."

"It's the truth. Somebody's got to say it."

"Not you. You should've kept your mouth shut."

"Good advice, scum—but I don't listen to good advice." He picked up the hoe, tried to break the shaft over his thigh, and when that failed hurled the tool at the half-round disk of the setting sun. "Damn!—"

\* \* \*

They met Yohan in the wastes between the village and the Sun's Fist. The dwarf had aged profoundly since they'd last seen him. His eyes were red-rimmed and set in deep, dark hollows. His muscles had withered. His bedraggled kank was as shaky as him, and *not* one of the sleek Moonracer-bred bugs the Quraiters favored. He needed a steady hand when he slid from the saddle and would not meet either man's eyes as he told his story in broken, near incoherent snatches.

He said he'd ridden day and night, sleeping in the saddle when he could no longer keep his eyes open. Eating hadn't been a problem; he'd had no food with him when he escaped from Urik, and hadn't wasted time stealing any. He'd had water, for the first few days. Since then he'd kept going on will alone.

Pavek, having suspected something similar from the moment Telhami gave them the news, offered Yohan a waterskin fresh from the village well. The dwarf brushed it aside.

"It's no use. I'm finished."

"What happened first? How did it go bad?"

"Escrissar."

Pavek swore. He'd dared to hope that, whatever the catastrophe, Yohan had simply left Akashia in some temporary shelter, before racing back to Quraite for help. Hearing Escrissar's name, he could only hope that she was already dead.

Very dead.

He took a swallow from the flask to calm himself.

"Stan at the beginning—"

Yohan obliged. Between Ruari's game ankles and the dwarf's exhaustion, their pace was slow enough that the tale was nearing its elven market climax as the three men approached the green fields.

"How'd you escape?" Pavek demanded, stopping short while they were still on barren ground. He knew his city and a dozen ways through the walls that didn't involve the gates. But none of those secret passages used the elven market.

“That dwarf, that hairy bastard in a procurer’s robe, and a common woman with serpents tattooed on her arm were coming for us. I don’t know—maybe I could have taken them both, but that still left Escrissar, the mind-bender, and Kashi hadn’t known where he was all afternoon. I wanted to stand together right there, or stand alone to give her the escape.” Yohan ground his knuckles against his eyes and stared at the violet sky. “One of us had to get back to Quraite, she said. I couldn’t keep the secret, not against what we were facing: a mind-bender Kashi couldn’t know. But she swore she could. And I knew the way out; she didn’t—”

“How *did* you get out, Yohan?” Pavék seized Yohan by the shoulder and spun him around—a testament to the dwarf’s weakness and exhaustion. “There’s no way through the walls from the market. Who helped you? What did he give you in return?”

“Pavék! No!” Ruari shouted, trying ineffectively to loosen Pavék’s hold on Yohan.

Pavék let go of his own accord, shoving the dwarf backward and turning his helpless fury on the half-elf. “There’s no passage in the market; the walls there are solid. He had to have help to get out of the market and out of Urik. Escrissar’s help, scum. *Escrissar!* Escrissar set him free, sent him back to us!”

“Not Escrissar,” Yohan said wearily. “Elves. An old debt. A tribe that didn’t die at the same time a free village went down to templars. They named me ‘friend’ and said they—all of them, whatever tribe—would owe me life whenever I needed it. They got me out. Debt’s paid now. Understand?”

Reluctantly Pavék nodded. He wanted to lash someone with his rage, but what Yohan said made sense. It even answered some of his questions about Yohan himself. But the dwarf’s history couldn’t hold his thoughts, which skewed back to his original question:

“How did you escape? You were up against Rokka and Dovanne.” He knew them by their descriptions. “You could’ve taken them in a fair fight. But if Escrissar was lurking, you shouldn’t have gotten away, Yohan. He

should've nailed you to the ground, just like he did those poor-sod farmers you left guarding the cart."

The dwarf turned away, took a half-step toward the salt, and stopped. "Last thing she said: 'Don't believe what I send.' She blasted us, Pavek. Turned her mind inside-out. Let the nightmares fly free: the hates and fears we all have locked up inside. But she'd warned me, and I didn't believe. I dropped to my knees and howled but didn't believe. Then it all just stopped. That woman and the dwarf, they were rolling on the ground; they'd believed. I got to my feet, and I saw him walking toward her... the masked one you talked about: Escrissar, with the talons. He looked at me, reached through my ribs and pulled out my heart. It was mind-bending, all mind-bending. But I believed him, and by the living doom of Kemelok, I ran away."

It didn't take a mind-bender to read a proud man's shame in the next few moments of silence. With his back still toward them, Yohan rubbed his eyes again and finished the tale: "That's all. The elves found me and got me out late the next day. I don't know where, but—for what it's worth—not through the elven market. I stole a kank, made sure no one was following me, and headed back here. It's over. I'll tell Grandmother and be gone again."

"To Urik?"

"Aye, to Urik, to Elabon Escrissar. She's gone, Pavek. I failed her, and I lost her, and my banshee will haunt that mind-bending scum until he's rotted in his grave."

"I'm going with you," Pavek said, surprising himself for a heartbeat. "I can get you into the templar quarter, into his house—"

"You're no dwarf. It doesn't matter whether I get through the city gates, as long as I'm close before they kill me. She was my focus, the faith of my life. My banshee will find him soon enough. Don't go wasting your life on my account."

I've my own scores to settle with that half-elf bastard," Pavek countered. "I'll get you there."

“Me, too,” Ruari announced.

Pavek had forgotten the youth was with them, looking exceptionally grim and elven in the late twilight. He regreted his description of Escrissar, but doubted it was any great part of Ruari’s determination to join them.

“What do you say, Yohan?” he asked. “The three of us take down House Escrissar: the interrogator, the halfling, Laq and everything in-between?” Yohan shook his head. “It doesn’t work that way. I can’t change my focus once I’ve broken it. I swore in my heart to take care of her, and I failed. I thought she’d see the truth about the city more clearly in the elven market, so I took her there instead of the customhouse. Your friends—” Yohan spat the word out so sarcastically that there was no danger of mistaking its contrary meaning “—were waiting for us. Failure’s forever.”

“You’re sure your banshee would stay in Urik?” Ruari asked, sounding young and anxious. “You’re sure it wouldn’t come back here? I mean, if you broke faith with your focus, it was because of Quraite, wasn’t it, as much as it was that half-elf bastard in Urik? If you broke faith at all. You knew it was a bad idea to take the zarneeka to Urik. Everyone knew how you felt, but Kashi and Grandmother, they wouldn’t listen. They broke faith first—”

Though Pavek thought Ruari had raised sound and serious questions, he squeezed the youth’s shoulder hard enough to make him shut up. Yohan was still staring at the salt, toward distant Urik. When Ruari looked up, snarling and ready for an argument, Pavek was able to mouth. *Not now and Later.* He gave Ruari’s shoulder a friendly shake, then released him.

“We’ll go with you to Urik,” he said, not a question this time.

“You, you can come, but not Ruari—”

Once again the youth scowled and opened his mouth. Once again Pavek snared a fistful of half-elf and squeezed it for silence.

“Scum’s got a right,” he said, negotiating in flat, unemotional tones. “He tried his best, busted up the stowaway, and the women got around him. He’s got a right to choose which mistakes he tries to correct: Telhami’s or Escrissar’s.”

If he finally had Yohan's measure, Pavek figured the weary dwarf would accept his offer. Besides, if Ruari became too much of a nuisance, they could always clout him unconscious and leave him behind in some market village.

"We'll ask Grandmother." Yohan capitulated and turned toward them. Relief showed on his face, for all that he was trying to hide it. No one wanted to die alone.

"We'll *tell* Telhami that we're going to fix the mistakes she's made, and that we'll *all* turn into banshees to haunt her if she tries to stop us."

\* \* \*

A little later, by the light of a lamp in her hut, Telhami told them their plan was typical male foolishness. "Kashi's dead. She'd kill herself—she knows how—before she'd submit to that creature or betray Quraite's secret. You've made your point: I was wrong. What the poor suffer without Ral's Bream is a small price to pay. Until Laq is a fading memory, our zameeka stays here in Quraite, hidden away. But Kashi's dead, and no amount of breast-beating or vengeance will change that. There's nothing left to be done. We've all paid the price. Forget Urik. Forget it all. Let it lie." She looked specifically at Yohan and added: "I'll forgive your focus, with the guardian's help. There's no reason to sacrifice yourself."

Yohan was speechless, but Pavek swore loudly enough to awaken the entire village.

And Quraite's guardian. Awareness flowed into him—threatened to destroy him with its intensity—then Ruari's hand was flat against his arm, helping him shape the power he'd instinctively invoked.

"Don't coddle me with your forgiveness," he roared, "or your tally of what's been paid and what's still owed. I know better; I *know* Escrissar! Look at me, Telhami. Look inside me! Look at what I know about Elabon Escrissar and tell me that there's nothing left to do!"

The old woman did not use her mind-bender's power to take the images he so desperately wanted to hurl into her mind's eye. She didn't even raise her eyes to meet his, but she did, somehow, cut him off from the guardian's power.

Ruari's hand slipped away, and the energized air within the hut dissipated on the midnight breeze.

"Hamanu's infinitesimal mercy is far greater than yours," Pavek whispered. She'd diminished his voice when she reaped the guardian's strength away from him. "He'd never let a favorite slip away unavenged."

His legs were dead-weight beneath him. Each step was precarious as he turned and plodded toward the door. Telhami said nothing, did nothing to stop him.

\* \* \*

There were three fresh kanks, provisions, and well-crafted obsidian weapons waiting beside the central well when Pavek picked himself up from the tree-shaded place where he'd fallen—literally—to sleep after leaving Telhami's hut. Telhami wasn't around. Ruari said she'd left the village for her grove at dawn, walking with just her staff to support her. He said that she was sorry, that she'd grieved and sobbed, torn her clothes and wailed that she was ready to die before she left her hut. Challenged by both himself and Yohan, Ruari admitted he'd spent the night spying and promptly ran off.

The boundless energy of youth, Pavek thought enviously while he washed sleep-grit from his eyes. He was stiff and sore, as if he'd been the loser in an uneven brawl—as, in a sense, he had been: Telhami had bested him before he'd known he was in a fight.

And then, before dawn, she'd conceded defeat.

He threw a leather harness over the kank's carapace, narrowly dodging its saliva-drenched mandibles. It trilled in the high-pitched, nerve-jangling way of bugs, making the hair all over his body stand on end, but the bug

minded its manners. He tightened straps around the food sacks and water jugs, and attached a long, obsidian knife to his belt.

Yohan was already mounted. The dwarf's eyes were still a study in red and black, but his strength had been restored by a half night's sleep. Ruari was returning with a fourth kank.

"In case we find her," he explained before any questions could be asked. "In case we get very lucky."

An extra kank couldn't hurt—especially if, as Ru said, they got very lucky. Pavek waited in silence while Ruari harnessed both his kank and the extra one. Villagers came to see them leave. The farmers saluted them with fingers twisted into various luck-signs or pressed sprigs of tiny white flowers into their hands. The druids hung back, their expressions more complex and much harder to read.

Few words were exchanged. Everyone, presumably, had heard Pavek's midnight explosion—by rumor, at least, if he hadn't actually awakened them. There wasn't much more to say. The sky was bright and cloudless, as it usually was. A storm—dust, wind, or Tyr—might sweep down on them before they got to Urik, with no one in Quraite ever the wiser. But, if there were no storms, they'd reach Urik in about four days. And after that—?

What could anyone say to three men riding to certain and unpleasant death?

What could they say to each other?

Nothing.

Yohan tapped his kank's antenna to get it moving. Ruari went next with an optimist's bug at the end of a rope. Pavek took up the rear.

\* \* \*

Telhami was waiting for them on the verge of the Sun's Fist. Her silhouette was hunched and shrunken. Despite the familiar veiled hat, Pavek didn't recognize her at first. She asked—an honest request, not a disguised command—to use her arts together in their minds to sequester their

knowledge of Quraite against all inquiry. It wouldn't, she insisted, prevent them from returning, but it would thwart Elabon Escrissar or anyone else who sought to unravel their memories.

“For Quraite—?” she asked.

Ruari and Yohan dismounted; Pavek stayed where he was. They knelt on the hard ground and were entranced by mind-bending and spellcraft. He and Telhami were effectively alone.

“For Quraite,” she repeated, and he wasn't swayed. “The guardian will keep your secrets safe from Elabon Escrissar.”

Reluctantly, Pavek slid from the kank's back. He had to kneel: there was no other way she could touch his eyes and ears or press her thumbs against his temples. Bolts of white lightning rebounded within his skull, within his mind. When they ended, Telhami was gone, the other two had remounted, and there was a mote of utter emptiness in his memory.

Settling himself in the kank's saddle he realized he knew exactly what the emptiness had contained: the background against which he'd lived his recent life. There were names: Telhami, Akashia, the farmers and the other druids, each associated with a familiar face and floating in an unnatural gray fog, as if he had dwelt in a cloud of smoke since leaving Urik.

He had Telhami's word that he could find his way back, if he was lucky enough to escape Elabon Escrissar; and that he would betray nothing if his luck ran out. It was thin, cold comfort, and he shivered the length of his spine, prodding the kank onto the dazzling Sun's Fist behind Ruari and Yohan.

\* \* \*

They left the kanks at a homestead barely within the broad belt of irrigated farms from which Urik drew its foodstuffs. A small shower of silver from Yohan's coin pouch bought promises that the bugs would be cared for and left in an open pen. There was risk. There was always risk when one

man bought another man's promise; neither knew who else might raise the asking price.

But few things held as much risk as breaking into a High Templar's house with thoughts of assassination in their minds.

Getting into Urik wasn't so difficult. Generations of templarate orphans had dared each other into reckless explorations of the city's remotest corners. They lacked prestige and promotions, but their knowledge of Urik was legendary. And just as Pavek was certain that there was no passage through walls near the elven markets, he knew there was one beneath the northwest watchtower. The only thing he feared as he cleared away the rubble from a loose foundation stone was meeting a band of his younger counterparts somewhere in the narrow, twisting passageway.

He knew they were halfway to the templar quarter when the passage widened into the shimmering blue-green curtain of the sorcerer-king's personal warding.

"You first," he said to Ruari, who turned gray in the eerie light and refused to move. "You've got my medallion. Give it back if you don't want to go first." He held out his hand.

"What makes you think I've got it with me?" Ruari countered, all spit and vinegar, and clutching his shirt where Pavek had known the ceramic lump was hidden.

He cocked his head toward Yohan who, with a weary sigh, thumped the half-wit between the shoulders, propelling him through the curtain, which hissed and sparkled but did not harm him. He and the dwarf scurried through before the sparking died.

"What if I didn't?" Ruari demanded.

"You'd be dead," he said bluntly and kept walking.

\* \* \*

The passage ended not far from the orphanage along the interior wall of the templar quarter, the most familiar part of the city for him, but not for the

other two, who were clearly daunted by the monotonous tangle of precise intersections and nearly identical facades.

“How do you *know* where we’re going?” Ruari asked in an urgent whisper, revealing that he failed to recognize the subtle decorations that distinguished a High Templar’s private house from a civil bureau barracks—and that he couldn’t read the inscriptions painted above every door.

“Magic.”

And knowing that Ruari would realized that he’d been pulled and would need to even the score, Pavék drifted closer, allowing the nervous scum to jab a fist into his arm. He hoped physical contact would settle the youth down. Curfew hadn’t rung, and though the foot-traffic was light, fellow wasn’t the only color on the streets. There were artisans and tradesmen making their way to homes in other quarters. A little laughter and sport helped them blend in. Hugging the shadows would’ve drawn precisely the attention he didn’t want, especially as they neared their destination.

Outwardly, House Escrissar looked no different from any other flat red and yellow facade. There were three doors—High Templars lived in luxury, but nothing was allowed to disturb the symmetry of the quarter—each marked with the same angular symbol the halfling alchemist wore on his cheek. There were interrogator’s glyphs, too, and warnings that no one was welcome across the threshold unless specifically invited.

The orphans had respected those warnings. Their scavenging expeditions stayed well away from House Escrissar, at least during Pavék’s lifetime. But the buildings of the templar quarter *were* identical, and he had no trouble locating the boiled leather panel that, when lifted, revealed a midden shaft: High Templars did not bury their rubbish in their atrium gardens, nor did they dump it out the upper story windows as folk did in those mixed quarters where scroungers kept the streets clean. They—or their slaves—gathered it up discreetly in buckets and barrels for other slaves to collect.

Pavék warned his companions to watch their footing while he studied the shaft that stretched to the rooftop above them. There was no shimmering

curtain to block his view of the stars. But not all wards declared themselves so boldly. Escrissar might have sealed himself within invisible wards, but even he would have had to beg the spell from King Hamanu, and the king might have wondered why. Pavek was willing to wager his life that there were no invisible wards in the shaft or anywhere else.

Not that it mattered much. He wasn't expecting to be alive when curfew struck. He'd never had many ambitions, had never expected to grow old—even when his life was secured by a yellow robe with a regulator's colors woven through the sleeves. Death gathered up men like him sooner rather than later; but he'd never considered that death was waiting around midnight's corner. Suddenly his pulse was racing, and he shook so badly he leaned against the wall for support.

"I'll go alone from here," Yohan suggested gently. "You've done your part. Go home. Live another day. Take Ruari."

Pavek's thoughts turned gray and filled with open, honest faces, brown-haired teal-eyed Akashia foremost among them. If home—that place beyond the empty fog—had held Akashia, he would have gone. He wouldn't die for Laq or Ral's Breath or Urik; but she was here, needing vengeance, needing rescue. Her cries echoed through fog and dark.

*She was here.*

"Pavek—?"

That was Ruari's voice calling him out of the fog, and Yohan's heavy hand steadying his shoulder. He shrugged the hand away.

"She's here. She's still here, still alive. I heard her."

"Pavek—whatever you're doing. Stop!"

Stop what? he wondered, then he felt it, the same swirling power he felt in the groves of Quraite. Quraite—the name, the place he shouldn't remember, mustn't remember. Confused and moaning, he wound his fingers in his hair, twisting it tightly until there was enough pain to take away the fog, the faces, and—finally—the name itself.

The mote of emptiness in his memory had returned. The name and everything associated with it was gone. He sank into a deep squat, trying to

understand what had just happened.

“What was that all about?” Yohan demanded.

“An evocation,” Ruari said, his voice as shaky as Pavek felt. “You evoked something... *something*. Hamanu. Did you evoke Hamanu?”

Pavek looked up in time to see Ruari fumbling with the medallion. “No,” he whispered, still mystified, himself. “Not Hamanu. I don’t know... It felt like—” The emptiness loomed around him, and words failed utterly. “I don’t know,” he said, and repeated the phrase several times.

“A guardian.”

He denied it, and Yohan swore; but Ruari was certain. “Guardians arise from the spirit of Athas,” he said, as if he were reciting one of Telhami’s lessons. “But a guardian isn’t Athas. It’s what makes one aspect of Athas different from all the others: one mountain, one grove, one stream—one unique something.”

“There’s nothing here,” Yohan objected. “Buildings and people. They’ve sprawled over everything. There’s nothing left for a guardian.”

“Urik. Urik’s here. Urik’s unique.”

Pavek stood up. He pressed his palms against the wall of House Escrissar and closed his eyes. The presence was there: Urik, far older than the sorcerer-kings—massive, and powerful. It rose to meet him, and he stepped back, letting the power subside once he had sensed what he needed, and nothing more.

“She is here.”

The smoothed and painted plaster of the templar quarter facades did not extend to the midden shafts, where unfinished brick provided a multitude of handholds for three men climbing to the roof. Like most wealthy Urik residences, House Escrissar was built around a courtyard filled with fruit trees, fragrant flowers, fountains, and pools, and lined from ground to roof with an arbor of berry-vines. The courtyard was quiet except for the fountains. It was dark, too, with only a faint dappling of light seeping through the tracery of a few of the many rooms that faced the courtyard. It was also deserted—or so Pavek devoutly hoped. Neither experience nor

logic suggested where they should lower themselves from the roof to the upper story of living rooms, but, having come further and survived longer than any of them had expected, they grew more cautious with each passing moment.

“Are you certain?” Yohan asked when Pavek hoisted his leg over the balustrade.

“I think she’s here. I think she’s alive. I think this is the way. But I’m not certain of anything. Pick some other place, if you want. This is the way *I’m* going.”

And the way Ruart and Yohan followed: swinging down from the roof into the vine arbor whose support slats sank ominously beneath both him and the dwarf. For several moments, they paid more attention to their footing, then Pavek heard an all-too-familiar voice:

“...Now or later, my dear lady, dead or alive. It makes no difference to me, but I *will have* your secrets. Your guardian can protect your past; I possess your present and your future. Remember that each time you resist.”

Silence followed and a sense that the night had become darker. Pavek caught Yohan’s arm as he surged toward the voice they’d heard.

“She’s there. I have to go to her—” Yohan’s tone was urgent, mindless.

Pavek could scarcely restrain him. “Do you want to get us all killed? Or die in front of her? Or do you want to get her out?”

The dwarf relaxed. “Get her out.”

“Then we’ve got to wait.”

Yohan seemed resigned until Akashia screamed. “I can’t wait. He’s hurting her. I can’t resist—”

“She is. She’s resisted since you left her, and she’ll go on resisting until *we get her out!*”

“It’s that window, there,” Ruari softly interrupted them. “I can climb and look through the tracery and see what we’re up against. I’m light enough.”

In the thin light, he could see that the youth had stripped himself of anything that might jangle or snag, and without either him or Yohan noticing. They'd been distracted, of course, but so was Elabon Escrissar.

"Go ahead," he said, giving Ruari's arm a light, well-meaning nudge for confidence's sake.

"Go with Rkard," Yohan said more soberly. The next moments were the longest of Pavek's life. Akahia moaned, Escrissar taunted, and Ruari had completely disappeared. Someone wearing a yellow robe and carrying a lamp came and stood not an arm's length away in a corridor in the other side of the tracery that supported the berry arbor. Pavek held his breath until his lungs were burning.

The templar went away. Ruari returned.

"It's a small room with one door," he whispered. "Kashi's bound on a bench with cushions. He doesn't touch her, just stands there behind his long black mask, clicking his long black claws against each other—"

"He's an interrogator," Pavek interjected. "He doesn't need to use his hands."

And Yohan quietly swore a bloody vengeance.

"There's someone else in the room. Shorter and standing in the shadows. I couldn't see him clearly. But I think he's wearing a mask, too."

"The halfling. His face is covered with scars; it looks like a mask. Anyone else? Any guards? Templars?"

"Kashi and two men wearing masks. That's all I saw. What do we do now?"

"We wait. He's an interrogator, one of the best. They make the prisoners do the hard work. He'll leave her alone so she can think about what he's done, and what he's going to do. We'll move while he's resting, and she's helpless."

"You're beasts, all templars, every last one of you," Yohan murmured. "Worse than beasts. You've got no conscience."

Pavek didn't argue.

They waited, listening, hoping Escrissar would end the torment for the night, and expecting that the midnight gong would strike at any time. Getting through the streets to the wall-passage would be much more difficult and dangerous after curfew. Then, without warning, the moment came: the light in Akashia's prison dimmed through the tracery and two black-robed men, one quite tall, the other noticeably shorter, came along the corridor. They held their breaths and looked away, lest a flash of light reflecting off an open eye would give them away.

"Let's go."

The lightweight tracery panels of precious wood came out easily. They moved into the corridor. Pavek and Yohan unsheathed the long obsidian knives Telhami had provided for them. Ruari, who admitted no skill with edged weapons but claimed to have learned something about picking locks from his elven relations, went a half-step ahead. The mechanical lock was simple and the door flimsy enough that they could have battered it down with little trouble, but Ruari was quieter and almost as quick. Using a fragile contraption of straw and sinew, he eased the bolt free. It struck the floor behind the door with a *thunk* that common sense insisted was nowhere near as loud as it seemed to three jittery men in the corridor.

Ruari reached for the handle. Both Pavek and Yohan grabbed him before he clasped it and pulled him aside. The door swung toward them of its own weight. Standing out of harm's way, Pavek caught the handle with the tip of his knife. He let it swing open.

"Kashi?" he whispered.

"Pavek!"

The voice was feminine, but the woman who came out of the room with a short-sword in her hand wasn't Akashia.

"Dovanne." The only light came from a oil flame inside the room, but Dovanne with her cropped hair and serpent-circled arm was unmistakable.

She'd been the lamp-bearing templar who'd gone down the corridor. He hadn't seen her face or her arm. Still, if they had to face a templar guard, she was the best they could have hoped for. Dovanne took one look at him

and came on guard behind her sword. She didn't care about Ruari and Yohan dashing past to rescue Akashia. She didn't care about anything except spilling his guts on the floor and wouldn't sound an alarm or call for help until she was finished with him.

Dovanne, being smaller, had a slight advantage in the confined space of the corridor, but otherwise they were evenly matched. Her iron sword had a guard that offered some protection for her wrist. It also had a curved blade and had been sharpened along the outer edge only. His obsidian knife was a composite weapon, cheaper than metal, but every bit as deadly, with curved wedges of sharp black glass carefully fitted into a straight, laminated wood-and-sinew blade. It was long as her short-sword, had a naked hilt, and was razor-sharp along both edges and at the point.

She fainted first, a probing cut toward his weapon-side wrist. He parried and she withdrew. The blades sang—gray metal against glassy stone—but softly: neither of them wanted to attract attention. He dropped his guard two hand-spans, inviting an attack. She remembered that move from the countless times they'd bouts against each other while they were friends.

“Take a chance,” he taunted in a hoarse whisper. “You always said I was slow.”

Yohan and Ruari had gotten Akashia unbound and were trying—without much success by the sound of it—to get her on her feet. Dovanne heard the same sounds and belatedly realized what was happening in the room, what would happen to her if she failed her duty to Escrissar.

Beginning her attack with a low slash to his off-weapon thigh, which he had to parry, Dovanne tucked and rolled into Akashia's room—“Yohan!” he shouted as loudly as he dared. She came up to her feet with the sword poised for a downward slice—

Into Yohan's obsidian blade as Pavek came through the door.

He knew her well enough to see the thoughts forming behind her eyes: two against one. She was going to call for help.

“This one’s mine,” he announced, beating Yohan’s knife aside with his own and praying that the dwarf would guess the strange rules of this particular game.

It didn’t really matter whether Yohan understood or not, he was interested in Akashia, not Dovanne.

Dovanne tried another attack when the dwarf turned his back, but Pavek was waiting. They traded feints and insults.

The room was bigger in all dimensions than the corridor, despite being crowded. The advantage swung to him, and he made his first serious attack: a quick beat against her blade then a thrust at the soft flesh below her ribs. She countered fast enough to make him miss, and they sprang apart.

There was movement at Pavek’s back: a loud—*oooff*—as Yohan scooped Akashia over his shoulder, effectively removing himself from any possible defense or attack as he scurried toward the door. Dovanne could see them better than he could, but he could see the desperation take command of her face. Ruari had Yohan’s knife, but anyone with half the experience he or Dovanne had could see that the half-elf didn’t know which end to point into the wind.

Desperation called Dovanne’s shots: One all-out attack against him. If she nailed him, she’d have the other two, hands down. She’d come out of this a hero.

He saw the feint coming and parried with the middle of his blade, leaving the point in line. She came low with a counterparry, trying to get under his guard for an upward slash at his groin. But he was ready with a thrust. He gave the hilt a twist as the point pierced her skin and pushed the blade through to her spine.

“Pavek...”

Her knees buckled, the sword—as fine a weapon as was likely to come his way—slipped from her hand. He released the obsidian knife’s hilt; she fell to the floor, and he picked up the metal sword.

“Pavek...” She held out her serpent-wrapped hand.

The wound was mortal; he knew the signs. He had her weapon, and she wasn't going to do anything treacherous with his. For the sake of the past, he bent down and took her hand. She squeezed with uncanny strength, trembled and grimaced as she pulled her head and shoulders up. He dropped to one knee and laid the sword down, thinking to put his arm behind her neck as she said her dying words.

A gob of bloody spittle struck his cheek, and she went limp.

He retrieved the sword and wiped his face on his sleeve, then he hurried down the corridor to give his companions a hand lifting Akashia to the roof.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“There’s no way,” Pavek muttered, shaking his head. Still in the templar quarter, on a street not far from House Escrissar, he huddled with Ruari and Yohan, Akashia slumped against his side, barely able to stand, oblivious to him and everything else. Yohan had carried her down the side of House Escrissar; the dwarf would carry her forever if he had to, but he couldn’t carry her out of the city, at least not the way they’d entered it: the passage was too narrow, too low, with too many tight corners.

“She’s got to walk on her own.”

Neither Ruari nor Yohan answered, there being no reply to the obvious. He steadied Akashia with his hands on her shoulders, then stepped back. She tottered once from side to side, then her knees gave out completely, and she would have fallen if he hadn’t gotten his arm around her quickly.

“What’s wrong with her?” Ruari demanded.

“You’re the druid. You tell me,” he replied, sharper than necessary, sharper than he’d intended.

His nerves were raw. They’d had no trouble—yet—other than the obvious problems Akashia herself had given them, and Yohan had wrestled successfully with those—so far. He didn’t trust luck, not at times like this.

The quarter echoed with the clang of brazen gongs, but: those were only domestic gongs summoning household members home from their evening activities before the great city curfew gong struck at midnight. House Escrissar itself remained dark and quiet, unaware, it seemed, that a woman lay dead on an upper-room floor and the prisoner she’d guarded was missing.

For all Pavek had a dozen worries about Akashia, it was Dovanne’s face that loomed behind his eyes: her face twisted with mortal pain and hate the instant before she died, and her face as it had been years ago. He told himself he had no regrets, that Dovanne certainly wouldn’t let his dying

eyes haunt her, if events had gone the other way. They'd had no choice tonight or ever, either of them.

But he still couldn't get that look out of his mind.

"I said: I'm no healer!" Ruari's hand struck his arm, demanding attention. "Wind and fire, Pavek, you're not listening. What's wrong with *you*?"

He truly hadn't heard the words the first time Ruari must have said them, but something in the words—or tone—of the repetition penetrated Akashia's mindless daze. She whimpered and buried her face against his neck, but when he put his other arm around her, she stiffened, then began to tremble.

His own helplessness in the face of Akashia's need drove Dovanne at last from his consciousness, replaced her death-mask with a black mask and talons. He'd come back. Escrissar would answer for what he'd done.

But first they had to get Akashia out of Urik.

*"Pavek!"*

"Nothing. I'm trying to think."

"Think fast," Yohan suggested. "Curfew's going to ring soon. Inside or out, we can't be here when it does. Don't suppose you had any friends who might do you a favor? A woman, maybe?"

Dovanne returned, hard and angry, and remained with him until he shook his head so vigorously that Akashia's trembling intensified, and she clutched his shirt in fists so cold he could feel the chill through the coarse cloth. Telhami could heal her, he was certain of that, but getting her to Telhami wasn't going to be easy.

He saw no other choice except to go to ground for the night and hope that sleep and food—which they could buy in the morning market—would restore her enough to make the rest of the journey possible.

But go to ground where? The places of his life: the orphanage, the barracks, the archives, and even the customhouse paraded themselves before his mind's eye. Of those, the customhouse, with its myriad maze of storerooms, might be a last-chance refuge—a very last chance.

There was Joat's Den, near the customhouse, where he'd done his after-hours eating and drinking, but Joat wasn't a friend to his customers, and the Den stayed open well past curfew. Besides, there was a reason he'd spent his off-time at Joat's: they couldn't go there without being seen by the very templars whose attention they were determined to avoid.

There was one other place, filled with such mixed memories that he'd forgotten it entirely, even though it was where he'd spent his last night in Urik: Zvain's bolt-hole beneath Gold Street, near Yaramuke fountain. Considering his leave-taking, Zvain was likely to be less a friend now than Joat, but he *would* take them in—if only because with Yohan and Ruari beside him, they would be three against one.

And maybe tomorrow he could complete the circle by taking Zvain out of Urik with them. There were four kanks; they could do it—

“Now, Pavek. *Now!*”

“All *right*. I've... thought of a place. We'll be safe there.”

Yohan took Akashia in his arms and lifted her to his shoulder. “Where? How far?”

“A bolt-hole under Gold Street.” He started walking. “Belongs to an orphan I knew—” He was going to say more, then reconsidered. “He'll take us in, that's all.”

Three disparate men marching through the streets with a human woman draped over a dwarf's shoulder wasn't uncommon in a city where marriage was frequently a matter of slavery or abduction. They drew a few stares, but the people who stared were hurrying home, even here in the templar quarter, and not inclined to ask any questions.

They had an anxious moment at the gate between the templar quarter and the rest of the city, but apparently no respectable household had reported a missing young woman. Pavek's explanation that his sister had run off with the wrong man—along with a hasty shower of silver from Yohan's coin pouch—saw them into the next quarter of artisans and shopkeepers with nothing more than a warning to be off the streets by curfew.

\* \* \*

The alley where the Gold Street catacomb began had taken a beating in the most recent Tyr-storm. Most of the debris had been scavenged clean, but larger chunks of masonry covered the cistern that, in turn, had covered the catacomb entrance.

Pavek swallowed panic—he hadn’t considered what the storm might have done to Zvain’s bolt-hole; hadn’t, he realized gazing on this small disaster, truly considered what might have happened to Zvain, either. But the catacomb would have survived—the bakery attached to the alley made more money renting space dug out from its cellar than it made from its ovens, and Zvain... Zvain had managed before he’d arrived—he’d have survived his leaving as well.

Pavek glanced around quickly and spotted another cistern. It proved empty and fastened to a slate slab. He had them underground before anyone else realized things weren’t quite the way he’d expected them to be.

By night the catacomb was as dark as the Dragon’s heart. They stumbled into each other, the walls, and the occasional door. There were dozens of people living here, all aware that strangers walked among them. Whispers and warnings disturbed the still air, but no one interfered. Still, Pavek stifled a relieved sigh when he finally felt the familiar wickerwork patterns beneath his fingers.

“Zvain?”

Nothing. He waited and whispered the name again.

Still nothing.

The bolt-hole might belong to someone else entirely; Zvain might have found a better place to live—he certainly hoped that was the case, but it was equally likely the boy’s luck had gone bad rather than better.

It didn’t matter. The curfew gong would clang any moment now. There was no place else for them to go. Pavek drew his sword—Dovanne’s sword;

and a loud, unmistakable sound in the darkness—then, squeezing the latch-handle from habit more than hope, put his weight against the flimsy door.

The latch-bolt hadn't been thrown; the door swung wide into a quiet, apparently empty room.

The bolt-hole was musty with the smells food made if it dried out before it completely rotted. Food... or bodies.

Swallowing hard and wishing for a torch or lamp, he went inside.

His hand found the shelf beside the door, the lamp, and a flint sparker: all as it should be, and light revealed the bolt-hole as he remembered it last—*exactly* the way he remembered it last, even to the slops bucket on its side a few steps from the rumpled bed.

Before he had considered the implications, Yohan brushed past with Akashia, and the moment was gone.

They put her on the bed, where she sat, knotting the frayed linens through her fingers, but she wouldn't lie down. When Ruari asked if she was hungry and offered her a heel of bread from his belt pouch, she gave no sign she'd heard the question until he waved the bread directly in front of her eyes. Then she took it into her hands, tearing off crumbs, which she savored slowly. But she offered no conversation, no sign that she recognized them.

Just blue-green eyes staring past the lamp, seeing things Pavek was certain he didn't want to imagine.

"She'll be better in the morning, when she's had time to rest," Ruari said, as much a question as a statement.

Pavek and Yohan exchanged worried glances and otherwise ignored the half-elf's comment. There was an outside chance Ruari was right. Physically, Akashia seemed unharmed. Her face was drawn, with dark smudges beneath her eyes and hollows beneath her cheekbones, but there were no cuts or bruises that he could see. She wasn't starving, and her clothes were clean, as was her hair. In outward respects, Escrissar had cared well for his prisoner.

But Pavek knew how interrogators got their answers. He'd heard her moaning and, looking into her beautiful but vacant eyes, he feared that in her determination to keep Telhami's secret, she'd sacrificed everything that had made her human.

Most templars, in a final act of brutal mercy, would slash the throat of a prisoner when they were done questioning him, but though interrogators would question the dead without hesitation, they boasted that they themselves never killed.

There were those who would prefer her in this empty state: an especially vile breed of slavers traded in mind-blasted men and women, a breed scorned by their flesh-peddling peers—a sobering condemnation when he considered it. Other than keeping her from that fate, Pavek didn't know what manner of mercy he could give Akashia if her wits didn't come back. Right now, that wasn't his problem, and that was mercy enough for him.

“Grab some floor and get some sleep,” he advised Ruari and Yohan. “I'll take the first watch.”

He threw the latch-bolt and put a slip knot in the string dangling from it, to slow down anyone—the missing Zvain, included—who might try the door while they slept. Then he pinched the lamp wick, and except for a faint cast of moonlight through the isinglass stone set in the ceiling, the bolt-hole became dark. Akashia made small, panicked noises that left him sick with anger toward the interrogator who'd imprisoned and tormented her, until Yohan—Pavek assumed it was the dwarf by the way the bed creaked—whispered soft assurances that quieted her.

The sound of one person comforting another was strange to Pavek's ears. The act simply hadn't occurred to him. He wouldn't have known what to say or do. Kindness had played little part in an orphan-templar's life. It had never seemed a serious loss.

Until now.

Urik was quiet above them. An occasional foot fell across the isinglass: a mercenary patrol, exempt from curfew and paid to guard the property of Gold Street. Templars weren't welcome here. Merchants didn't trust them.

Pavek felt safe with his back against the door and the gentle rumblings of sleep all around him.

And through that quiet darkness, Dovanne came to haunt him. He'd expected mat, with the bitter grief burning deep in his throat and behind his eyes. He wondered what if anything would have changed if he'd known how to console her as Yohan consoled Akashia, those years at the orphanage. Probably they'd both be dead—too soft and sentimental to survive in the templatate.

The bed creaked. Pavek rose into a crouch on the balls of his feet, the sword he had never sheathed angled in front of him.

"Stand down," Yohan muttered, pushing the blade aside. He was a dwarf; he could see in the dark. "I'll take over."

"How is she?"

"Better, I think. She said my name, but I don't know if she knew I was beside her. I'm coming back, Pavek."

"So am I."

"Thought you might be. First, there's tomorrow. We're going to need a cart. She's not going to be able to walk. I could carry her to the Temple of the Sun. We're not poor—"

"Not if you got four gold pieces every time you delivered a load of zarneeka." Once again, Pavek heard himself speaking more harshly than he'd intended. Even a night-blind human could see—feel—the scowl suddenly creasing Yohan's face.

"For emergencies," the dwarf said, defensive and angry and shuffling away through the dark before adding: "Go to sleep."

And Pavek stretched out where he was, thinking that it was easier to master druid magic than life outside the templatate, where people cared about each other and mere words held an edge sharper than steel.

\* \* \*

Curfew ended and the day began in Urik not with sunrise but with the orator's daily harangue from a palace balcony. Pavek was awake and listening as the first syllable of the morning laudatory prayer to Great and Mighty King Hamanu struck his ear. There were the usual admonitions and announcements, nothing at all about a death or an abduction in the templar quarter. But then, he hadn't truly expected to hear any. The templarate cleaned its house in private; his own denunciation had been unusual—

Which reminded Pavek of the earth cleric, Oelus, who had called him 'friend' and who was a healer. He'd never known which aspect of earth the cleric venerated, which of the many earth temples in Urik he called his home: a large one where his talents and choices might be overlooked, or a small one where his word was law? Either way, Oelus would be worth the risks associated with finding him—if Akashia still needed a healer.

The harangue was over. Pavek stood up and stretched the night-cramps out of a body that was getting too old for sleeping on the bare ground. His companions were awake and blocking his view of Akashia.

"How is she?" he asked.

"Better," Yohan answered with a disturbing lack of enthusiasm.

"How much better?"

He wedged his shoulder between the other two men and saw the answer for himself. Akashia reacted to the movement: looking up, staring at his face. The black pupils of her eyes grew large, then shrank to pinpoints in slow, unnerving cycles.

"Akashia?" He held out his hand.

Her gaze followed his fingers. Her hand rose toward his, then fell. And her eyes went flat and unchanging.

"She's coming back," Ruari insisted. "She sees us and hears us; she didn't before. She's coming. It's just a matter of time."

"Do we have the time?" Yohan asked. "I don't think it would be wise to carry her all the way to Modekan, not half-aware, the way she is. It's time or a cart. How safe is this place? Who's in charge? Templars?"

Pavek thought of the no-nonsense baker who'd collected the weekly ten-bit rent while he was here with Zvain. The woman might be willing to let them stay as long as they needed, as long as they paid in metal coins. She hadn't seemed the sentimental sort who'd hold a marketable room empty in the hope that an orphan boy would return to it, and since the room had obviously remained empty since he'd left, they obviously wouldn't have a lot of competition for it. If he could find her... talk to her—

Yohan's fist rapped his forearm and gave a gesture toward the door. The latch rose, struck the bolt, and fell. Pavek and Yohan scurried for their weapons; Ruari crouched beside the bed, one arm around Akashia. A hook-shaped device, not unlike Ruari's lockpick, slid through a hole in the door to snag the string, but the knots Pavek had tied after curfew meant that the string couldn't be withdrawn through the hole and that the bolt couldn't be moved from the other side of the door.

Pavek, standing beside the door, mimed sliding the bolt free; Yohan nodded agreement and Pavek pushed it loose and lifted the latch itself, then he retreated hastily as the door began to move. It had happened quickly enough that he hadn't given a thought to who might appear in the doorway and was speechless when it proved to be a hale and healthy Zvain.

"Pavek!" the youngster shouted through a gleeful smile. He spread his arms wide and, ignoring the sword, flung himself across the room. "Pavek!"

Wiry arms locked firmly around Pavek's ribs. Tousled hair and a still-downy cheek pressed against his chest. Stunned and vaguely perplexed by Zvain's affectionate explosions—it was hardly what he'd have expected after leaving the boy behind, hardly the way he would have reacted were their positions reversed—Pavek draped his free arm limply around the boy's shoulders, lowering the sword until it rested against his leg.

"Who's he?" Ruari and Yohan demanded together.

"Zvain. He—" Pavek began, but Zvain was quicker.

"Pavek saved my life after my father killed my mother and Laq killed my father. He stayed with me, right here. He had plans. We were going to put a stop to the poison. Then he disappeared, just vanished one afternoon." Zvain swiveled in Pavek's arms, fixing him with a wide-eyed stare that was

far more open and trusting than anything Pavek remembered seeing while they dwelt together in the bolt-hole. “But I knew you’d come back. I knew it! And you have, haven’t you? You’ve found a way to stop Laq, haven’t you? And these people are going to help?”

“Zvain, that’s not—” The truth, he wanted to say, but Ruari cut him off.

“What is he? Your son? Your son that you left here?”

Trust the half-wit scum—the *oh-so-predictable* half-wit scum to see everything with his own peculiar prejudice. “Zvain’s *not* my son—”

Zvain cut him off again. “More like a brother. Aren’t you?”

Something was wrong, subtly but terribly wrong, though it would be harder to admit that the youngster was telling a pack full of lies than to go along with the glowing portrait he created of their prickly weeks together. He was still seeking the words that would explain the contradictions he felt when Ruari seized his sleeve.

“You left him here. You were looking all around that afternoon. You said it was templars, but it wasn’t. You left him here, all alone—”

“Can’t blame him for that, Ruari,” Yohan interrupted softly but urgently. “We weren’t exactly gentle with Pavek here that day. He wanted to keep the boy clear of us. Can’t blame him for that, you least of all.”

To his credit, Ruari relaxed his hold on Pavek’s shirt and stepped back to take Zvain’s measure. By temperament, at least, they could have been brothers. Zvain released one half of his grip on Pavek’s ribs and took Ruari’s hand.

“Are you Pavek’s friend now?”

“You should’ve told us, Pavek,” Ruari said through clenched teeth and looking at Pavek, not Zvain. “Once you knew we were safe in—” He blinked and cocked his head; Telhami had worked her mind-bending spellcraft on him, too, leaving that gray hole in his memory where the name of that safety should lie.

“Safe? Where?” Zvain asked, looking from Ruari to him. “Where’ve you been. You weren’t in Urik. I know. I looked everywhere.”

“Once we were safe at home,” Ruari finished. The interruption gave Pavek a necessary half-moment to think. “Where have you been?” He looked down into the open, trusting face, which blinked once and returned to the wariness he remembered. “Not here. No one’s been in this room since I left. And you’ve changed, Zvain—”

Ruari seized his shirt again. “Of course the boy’s changed! You left him. He couldn’t live here, not alone. You should rejoice that he survived and that he doesn’t hate you for abandoning him. You should swear that you won’t leave him behind ever again. *Ever!*”

Pavek supposed Ruari was right, supposed he should swear the very oath Ruari was suggesting. He wanted to. Zvain’s face was guileless again, offering him a new beginning, if he’d take it. And he wanted to take it. Wanted to believe the boyish candor.

“You won’t leave me behind again, will you, Pavek? You’ll take me with you, won’t you? The way Ruari says you can?” Every muscle in Pavek’s body tightened simultaneously: Zvain knew Ruari’s name. It seemed a significant mote of knowledge, somehow, until he recalled that Yohan had used it. He’d learned their names the very same way. Of course, Ruari wasn’t in charge, any more than he was. If anyone in the bolt-hole was authorized to make such a decision, it was Akashia.

Akashia. For the first time since Zvain had entered the room, he looked to the far side of the room where he’d last seen Akashia staring blank-eyed and listless.

But no longer.

She was crouched on the bed, flattened against the dirt wall, her mouth working silently, while her hands wrung the linen sheet that trailed down in front of her. Yohan and Ruari leapt past him to her assistance.

“What’s wrong with her?” Zvain asked, and pressed tighter still against Pavek, forcing him to stand there, helpless. “Has she been eating Laq?”

It was a possibility Pavek hadn’t considered. Escrissar was capable of feeding her poison with the meals that kept her strength up for his interrogations. But Laq was a poison that some people—Zvain’s father

among them—ate willingly until it killed them. Kashi would starve in the condition she was in, and he could see, as her mouth moved, that her tongue wasn't black.

“No,” he answered Zvain distractedly, “but bad things have happened to her—”

“She's not a Laq-seller, is she?” The boy's voice shook ever-so-slightly.

Pavek glanced down into eyes wide with contained fear, and suddenly, his ingratiating affection no longer seemed inexplicable: the boy *didn't* want to be left behind again. He'd turn himself inside-out to avoid that happening again.

Even the unchanged emptiness of the bolt-hole itself could be explained, along with Zvain's appearance this morning. There were, after all, other families living in the catacombs, families that had known Zvain's family and might have been willing to take him in.

“Is she?” Zvain repeated. “Is she someone you're trying to rescue?”

“In a way.” Pavek found the tension sliding down his spine, found he could ruffle Zvain's hair and squeeze the narrow shoulders with a smile on his face—a sincere smile, not a templar's sneer that set the scar throbbing. “She's a friend—”

Keeping his arm around the boy's shoulders, he guided Zvain toward the bed where Yohan and Ruari had gotten Akashia calmed and sitting again. It seemed understandable to Pavek that, after what she'd been through among strangers, any strange face could push her to the edge of hysteria, but once she saw Zvain, learned to recognize him for the youth he was, he thought she'd be able to see him as a friend. She seemed to have ample patience for Ruari.

But before they reached her, Akashia's eyes locked onto Zvain's face, and she began to scream. Zvain shrugged free of Pavek's arm and got behind him instead, where Akashia couldn't see him.

“It is Laq! It is!” he shouted into the din. “She's seeing things that aren't there—just like my father did when the light was in his eyes!”

*Things that aren't there.* Perhaps Zvain was right. Perhaps it wasn't the boy at all. Sunlight beamed through the isinglass in the ceiling and struck the bed like so many arrows, and Zvain was an appealing youth with a warm smile when he chose to use it.

"You should cover her eyes 'til she gets better," Zvain said with the confidence born of experience. "That's what we did with my father, when we could, until he couldn't see us at all."

And he proceeded to tear at the hem of his own shirt, a generous gesture Pavek interrupted by wrapping him in a hug. But the notion itself was sound, and he told Yohan: "Try it. The boy knows what he's talking about, and I wouldn't put it past Escrissar to put Laq in the food he fed her."

The idea momentarily overwhelmed Yohan, whose face froze in a raging grimace, while his arms shook. Ruari, however, closed Akashia's eyes with his hands. At first that made her more frantic, then slowly, as Ruari whispered softly into her ear, she relaxed, though tears seeped between the half-elf's fingers. He lowered his hands, and sheltered her face against his shirt. Her arm worked its way across his back, holding on to him as she sobbed his name repeatedly.

Zvain went to work on his shirt-seams again. "We've got to keep the light from her eyes," he insisted. "It's the light that makes her see things."

Yohan had recovered. "We can use this," he said, tearing off a strip from the linen bedding.

"No!" Zvain lunged forward and pulled the cloth from the dwarf's hands. "It's dirty! Filthy! Let me rinse it out."

And Pavek, suddenly remembering the slops bucket Zvain had once emptied on that linen, was inclined to agree. The boy darted past him and carried the linen out of the room—once again the clever, impulsive, and willful boy Pavek had remembered.

He sheathed the sword he'd been holding all this time. Yohan, who had dropped his obsidian knife when Akashia first screamed, retrieved it as well.

“Seems a good lad,” the dwarf said for Pavek’s ears alone. “You never mentioned saving his life.”

“I didn’t. He saved mine. I owed him.”

“You owe him again.”

“If we can trust him. If he’s telling the truth.”

“I ken nothing amiss in him. Do you?”

A wry smile made his scar twinge. “No. But then, he’s fooled me before. Perhaps I want too badly to trust him.”

“Trust yourself. What harm can a boy do?”

He shrugged, recalling a bruise that took a painfully long time to fade, but accepted the dwarf’s assessment with some relief.

Akashia was still huddled in Ruari’s arms when Zvain returned with the damp cloth, which he returned to Yohan.

“You put it over her eyes, please. She knows you; she doesn’t know me. I think she’s afraid of me.”

And with Ruari’s help, Yohan did. “We’ve got to find a healer,” the dwarf said when they were done. “Got to get the poison drawn out of her.”

“Healers can’t help,” Zvain said solemnly. “We *tried* healers. There’s nothing they can do. They said to keep my father quiet, keep the sun from hurting his eyes. But when his eyes were burning, the only thing that would stop the pain was more Laq. We’ve got to get her away from Urik. You’ve got to take her home.”

Pavek looked from Yohan to Ruari and back again. “Zvain knows more about Laq than any of us.”

“We’ll need a cart—” Yohan began.

“I can get a cart,” Zvain said, moving close to Yohan and his visible coin purse again. He and the dwarf were about the same height and appraised each other evenly. “There’s always carts left in the village market after the farmers sell their crops. I can get you one for a silver piece.”

“What do you think, Pavek?”

“Hadn’t thought about it, but I imagine he’s right. You can go with him, or I can—”

“I can go myself! I’ve been doing everything for myself since you left.”

...A thought that gave Pavek one more pause as the boy slipped silently out the door with a pair of Yohan’s silver coins.

\* \* \*

Zvain wasn’t gone long and came back with a typical village handcart plus a basket of food—and a scant handful of ceramic bit coins that he counted carefully into the dwarf’s powerful hand, a degree of honesty that gave Pavek another twinge of doubt. A twinge that faded abruptly when he saw a final bit palmed.

Akashia had fallen asleep while Zvain was scrounging in the market. They tried, and failed to awaken her.

“It’s a good thing,” Yohan said as he prepared to hoist her over his shoulder. “She feels safe enough now to sleep. She couldn’t very well let herself sleep where she was.”

But it was disconcerting to see her arms dangling down Yohan’s back, limp and lifeless, as he carried her from the bolt-hole to the alley where the cart was waiting.

In the weeks following a Tyr-storm it wasn’t uncommon to see people who’d been blinded by the blue-green lightning or maddened by the howling winds. Akashia seemed no different than any other storm victim—or a Laq victim. Passersby averted their eyes and twisted their fingers into luck signs as the cart rolled past, but they approached the walls without attracting significant attention.

“You said getting into Urik was the easy part and getting out again would be more difficult. Now, how’re we going to get out?” Ruari whispered anxiously to Pavek when the western gate and its complement of templar guards loomed before them. “We didn’t register at a village. We

didn't come in through a *gate* so we didn't *give* our thumb-prints to the guards?"

"We're citizens of Urik, aren't we?" Pavek asked with a grin. "We have the right to visit any village we choose, whenever we choose, for whatever purpose we choose. We'll just smile at the templars as we leave the city, and then just not come back."

Ruari's eyes widened. "That's all? That's *all*? Why does anybody going in either direction ever bother to register? Just say you're a citizen and be done with it"

"Well, well have to bribe them, too," Pavek admitted and fell back a pace to walk beside Yohan. "How much silver have you got left?"

"How much do we need?"

Pavek rubbed his chin. "One silver piece for each of us should be enough. One silver piece for each of them—" he indicated the knot of templars, "and an inspector's likely to offer to pull the cart for us."

Yohan grumbled but dug out seven silver pieces. "I can pull the cart"

\* \* \*

The coin purse was nearly flat when four loaded kanks left the open pen of the borderland homestead. Zvain proudly, but somewhat anxiously, rode by himself with the provisions on the fourth kank. Akashia rode behind Ruari. She had not awakened at all during the long, hot walk from the city to the homestead, nor when they lifted her onto the kank's back and contrived to tie her to the saddle like so much precious cargo. With her cloth-bound head resting against Ruari's back and her hands resting limply against his thighs, she was no trouble at all.

And no help either.

"Which way?" Pavek asked.

The sun was sinking in front of them; Urik and the homestead were behind them. They'd gotten this far simply by retracing their steps along the

Urik roads. Now Pavek looked out at the wilderness. Nothing looked wrong—how could it when everything looked the same? Nothing felt quite right either, and there was a dark hole in his memory where his home—Akashia’s home—should have been.

“You don’t know the way?” Zvain sputtered. “You’re taking me out into the middle of nowhere to die?”

Ruari answered first: “We know the way. We just can’t remember all of it. Grandmother hid the knowledge away when we left for Urik. When we get to the Sun’s Fist, then we’ll remember.”

Zvain seemed satisfied with that answer. Pavek wasn’t. He thought Telhami could have trusted him at least as much as she’d trusted a half-wit scum who’d tried to poison him and then destroyed the zarneeka stowaway.

They guided the kanks in a wide arc to the north and east. The sun set and they made camp. A crackling fire kept the night chill away and turned the food Zvain had provided into a simple feast. Yohan untied the cloth covering Akashia’s eyes—over Zvain’s objections that firelight would be enough to start the Laq burning behind her eyes again. But the savory aromas that set their mouths watering and made them impatient with each other and the cookpots had no effect on Akashia. Her eyes were open again, but she didn’t seem to see the fire or anything else.

“She ate bread last night when I gave it to her,” Ruari grumbled when another piece of journey-break slipped unnoticed to the ground between her feet. “She’s getting worse, not better.”

Zvain nodded. “Laq,” he said. “It doesn’t take much sometimes. How far do we have to go? How much longer until we get there?”

“A few days.” Yohan picked up the journey-break, then threw it in the fire. He put another piece in her hand and, holding her fingers together, maneuvered the food to her lips. Her eyelids fluttered, she took a small bite and, very slowly, began to chew. “We’ll make it, Kashi. Grandmother will be waiting for us. She’ll take care of you.”

Zvain nudged Pavek with his elbow. “Who’s this ‘Grandmother?’”

“The high druid.” He couldn’t think of a better description. “She’s the one who says when it’s time to take zarneeka seeds to Urik. She’s the one who can cut the poison off at its root.”

“She can heal Akashia?”

“In—” Once again he looked for the word and found darkness instead. “At home, Telhami can do just about anything she wants, Zvain.”

“I don’t think I want to meet her. I don’t think she’s going to like me.”

“She doesn’t like me very much either, but she’s teaching me druid magic.”

Zvain’s mouth dropped open—from awe, Pavek thought, or possibly envy. They’d never talked about such things in the Gold Street bolt-hole. He didn’t know if Zvain was one of those who dreamt of magic or one of those who feared it. When Zvain edged away from him and lapsed into morose silence, he decided it must be the latter and wondered if bringing the youth to... *home* was a good idea. Faced with a choice between druidry and farming, Zvain might have preferred to remain in Urik. He’d been doing all right for himself mere, apparently.

“What did you do after I left?” he asked, curiosity getting the better of him. “Not stealing every day, I hope.”

“No, not stealing.” The boy stared at his feet a long time, then looked up and said: “I’m tired. I want to go to sleep now.”

He curled up in a blanket with his face toward the fire, eyes wide and staring at the flames. He was still staring when they wrapped Akashia in the thickest blanket and settled her between Ruari and Yohan, to keep her warm and to keep her from wandering off in the night.

Pavek laid Dovanne’s sword across his lap and took the first watch. Guthay set early. The skies became darker and a handful of shooting stars streaked across the sky.

He leaned over to tell Zvain, to share this small magic with the city-raised boy, but Zvain’s eyes were closed now, asleep with his fists tucked childlike beneath his chin and cheek.

The blanket had slipped. Pavek picked up a corner to pull it taut, but Zvain cringed and whimpered when he tried to tuck the cloth beneath those clenched fists.

*Not stealing*, he'd said. How many ways were there for an orphan youth to survive in Urik? Between what he'd known as a templar and what he'd lived as an orphan himself, Pavek figured he knew them all, and promised himself that he wouldn't ask any more questions.

Recalling Yohan with Akashia, he stroked Zvain's hair, murmuring a soft reassurance. But it seemed that *his* touch wasn't comforting. The boy started shivering, and Pavek simply left him alone.

\* \* \*

They made their way home as steadily as they could when none of them knew exactly where *home* was. Akashia was a growing concern, for all, but thanks to Yohan's patience and determination, she neither starved nor grew parched from thirst. Otherwise her condition remained the same: unaware of everything, except sunlight if it chanced to touch her eyes. Then she would flail and scream.

At last, however, the dazzling white expanse of the Sun's Fist flooded their vision with shimmering heat waves, whirlwinds, and a beautiful mirage: a tree-crowned village in the middle of a swaying, green-grass sea. As the mirage drifted through Pavek's thoughts, into the dark hole, which it filled precisely, he breathed out the single word: "Quraite," He realized he had not spoken alone.

"Quraite?" Zvain asked. "What? Where?"

And they all realized that Telhami had left the mirage strictly for them, to restore their strength and faith, and guide them across the featureless salt flats.

The heat and brilliance of the Sun's Fist was brutal, though not, by his memory, as brutal as it had been the first time Pavek had crossed it, when he hadn't known what lay on the other side. To spare Zvain that anxiety,

he'd asked both Ruari and Yohan to describe the guarded lands to a city-bred boy *before* they set foot on the salt.

But nothing they said erased the shadows of panic that rimmed Zvain's eyes. When they made a quick camp at sundown to water the kanks and themselves, he asked an exhausted-looking Zvain if he would prefer to ride the last leg of the journey with him or Yohan.

"I'll be all right. I'll be fine once I see Quraite with my own eyes."

Zvain got that chance not long after dawn when the mirage and the village merged. The whole village, druids and farmers alike, had turned out to greet them as they approached the fertile green fields.

"This is home," Ruari cried eagerly. "This is Quraite. It can't hurt Kashi's eyes!" And he tugged the cloth down until it hung below her chin and circled her neck.

The half-elf was wrong. Akashia shrieked with pain and terror, but they were within the larger expanse of Quraite now, where the land itself was a living thing, and where the guardian would carry Telhami wherever she wished in an instant.

The kank skittered when Telhami materialized at its side. But a bug's panic was no match for Telhami's determination to see Akashia for herself. The creature trilled once, then stood stock-still. The claws of all six feet dug into the ground as Telhami approached.

Kashi's screams had ceased. She sat motionless in front of Ruari, face buried in her hands, and moaned. Pavek and Yohan jumped down from their kanks and with Ruari's help lowered Akashia to the ground.

"Let me see her," Telhami commanded, and dropped down beside Akashia.

There was no druidry in the old woman's movements as she gathered Akashia in her arms and held her against her ancient breasts. No magic or mind-bending at all until, in her gentle efforts to move Kashi's fists, she brushed against the knotted cloth around Kashi's neck.

"What is this?"

Telhami's voice was barely audible, though Pavek stood opposite her with Ruari and Yohan flanking him. Taking the linen strip in both hands, she yanked once and the knot undid itself. The ends of the cloth fluttered in a breeze Pavek couldn't feel, then Telhami tossed it aside. With absent-minded curiosity, Pavek bent down to retrieve it.

"Later."

Her voice was still a whisper, but the most powerful and frightening whisper he'd ever heard. The hat turned toward his hand, and he was grateful for the veil that hid Telhami's face. "Help me," she said in the same awesome voice, this time to Ruari, who fell to his knees opposite her and held out his hands.

She called upon the guardian in a series of short, powerful invocations, and it came like a whirlwind rising out of the ground. Pavek's legs vibrated from the force surging through Ruari. Ruari himself cried out as the power whipped through his body, but his hands held steady and, just before it seemed the copper-haired youth would burst, Telhami began a different invocation, and the guardian's shaped energy leapt from their clasped hands to Akashia.

For a heartbeat it seemed that the land itself would open to engulf them all, then, as suddenly as the spellcraft had begun, it was over. Ruari slumped against Pavek's leg—hard—he needed all his strength and determination to keep his balance against the weight.

Telhami sat back on her heels, her hands resting palms-up in her lap, each fingertip shiny with blood. But for all their efforts—hers, Ruari's, and the guardian's—Akashia lay still, peaceful as a corpse.

Squatting on one knee, Yohan extended his hand slowly toward her face and traced the curve of her cheek and jaw. Blue-green eyes blinked open once, twice, and focused.

"Yohan," Kashi said, raising her hand to clasp his before he could withdraw it. "Yohan."

The celebration ended before it had begun. Telhami seized the linen cloth.

“Who did this? Who soaked this cloth in halfling poisons?” That terrible hollow sound was back in her voice. “Who tied this around her eyes?”

“I—I did, Grandmother,” Ruari stammered, still sitting on the ground and clearly too terrified to lie.

The half-elf had tied the cloth each morning, but he wasn’t the one who made it. Pavék stood, taller even than the kanks, while the others sat or knelt. He could see farthest, and he began to look for the dark-haired boy—who wasn’t beside them.

“Zvain made it.” He spotted the boy, then, doubled over; on the ground a hundred or so paces away. Zvain’s arms were outstretched on the ground beyond his head, pointing toward the trees of Quraite. He seemed to be praying, as well he should.

He shouted the boy’s name.

Kashi echoed him and added another name “Escrissar!” as she struggled to rise. She couldn’t stand, but she could crawl and growl like some enraged beast in the arena.

Time itself slowed as Pavék’s thoughts charged toward a single inescapable, yet incomprehensible conclusion. Zvain wasn’t praying. Zvain was doing his desperate best to establish a mind-bending linkage between himself and Elabon Escrissar.

It had to be Escrissar; it accounted, justified, explained why Akashia recognized him, why the sight of him filled her with such fear at first and such vengeful determination now.

And it explained the boy’s behavior since he’d appeared in the bolt-hole—so eager to please, to be helpful, to make certain that they’d bring him to Quraite, the secret Akashia had suffered so grievously to protect.

And as the toes of his sandals dug into the hard ground, driving him toward that corruption in the form of innocent youth, he had time to dunk, time to remember his now-and-again suspicions, and to remember how expertly Zvain had transformed those suspicions into guilt.

They'd learn soon enough how Zvain had fallen in with Escrissar: for the sluggish moment, all that mattered was that Zvain had mastered the interrogator's insidious craft, and that he be stopped before the connection between his mind and Escrissar's was complete.

Air burned in Pavek's lungs as time's slow movement corrected himself.

He was running recklessly, over-reaching with every stride. Zvain had risen to his knees, his hands clenched high above him.

And Pavek was only halfway there.

He stretched himself to his limit and beyond. The sole of his left sandal skidded on a loose stone; he lurched and twisted to keep his balance—felt muscles tear deep in his side—but his right foot landed solidly, and he kept going until a blast of hot, dry air exploded in his face.

The last thing he saw before his chin struck the ground was Zvain collapsing in a boneless heap under the whirling force that was Telhami's staff.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“I told him!” Zvain shouted, his voice filled with the intense hatred of youth-betrayed. “I told him where you are. He’s seen it in my mind. He’s coming with an army of ten thousand men and giants. It doesn’t matter what you do to me. You’re all going to die. Quraite’s going to die. Everything’s going to die.”

His nose and lips bloodied by Telhami’s staff, the boy backed away from his druid accusers, directly into one of farmers who had formed a tight and solemn ring around the scene. The woman seized him and flung him back into the circle. He stumbled, but pulled himself together to stand, defiant and terrified, some four paces in front of Telhami and Akashia.

Pavek himself stood a bit to one side, not in the farmer’s constraining circle, nor among the outraged druids. Zvain had looked his way more than once with wide, unreadable eyes. He’d met the boy’s stare, figuring he owed him that much.

He still didn’t know how Zvain’s path had crossed Escrissar’s or how he’d been seduced into an alliance with the ultimate Laq-seller. Telhami hadn’t asked. Telhami wasn’t interested in such small details. Quraite had been betrayed, and Akashia had been tormented; that was all that mattered. The laws of Athas, whether in Urik or Quraite, made no exceptions for children. Mercy was a rare gift, and, looking it Akashia’s hard, unforgiving frown, not one Zvain was likely to receive.

Nor one he deserved—

“Take him to my grove,” Telhami pronounced coldly. “The guardian will make him useful again.”

“Stay away!” Zvain held one hand palm-out, then dug beneath his shirt with both hands. When his hands reappeared, a dull gray powder leaked from one small, shaking fist and a dull brown powder from the other. “I’m a —a *defiler*! I know a spell that will destroy you all if you touch me.”

Telhami was unmoved. “Take him to my grove,” she repeated, nodding toward Yohan.

The dwarf strode forward, his faith in Telhami apparently stronger than his fear of the magic Zvain claimed to command.

Zvain’s eyes widened, his lips trembled, then tightened into a pout as he defiantly mixed the powders together.

Telhami did nothing to stop him.

The boy’s eyes squeezed shut, and he began to recite dark spellcraft syllables from that other, unfamiliar magical tradition that, by everything Pavek understood, drew its energy and power from the life essences of green plants. Those who were called preservers somehow managed to draw small amounts of energy from many plants without damaging any of them seriously. Defilers left only ash.

Quraite was plants. The most conscientious preserver could wreak havoc without depleting its green-life essence. A defiler’s power, even with a small spell, might be unlimited.

And still, Telhami’s calm remained.

But Pavek’s breath stuck in his throat as Zvain lifted his hands, and the hot wind off the salt flats carried the powder away, and—

Nothing happened.

There was no magic.

Zvain’s defiance crumbled; all that remained was the terror. His knees buckled. Yohan caught him as he went down. “He said it would work... He gave me magic and said I was a defiler forever.” Tears began to flow, and brokenhearted sobs. “He said I’d made my choice. That I couldn’t go back.”

Zvain clung to Yohan’s arm, pleading for mercy. He might as well have pleaded with a tree or a stone. Then he twisted himself around until he could see Pavek.

“Pavek? I thought I had no choice... Pavek? I’m sorry Pavek. I’m sorry...”

Pavek turned away.

“Pavek? *Help me, Pavek...* please?”

But Zvain’s fate wasn’t in his hands, and for that he was grateful; ashamed because he didn’t know right from wrong where the boy was concerned; and that much more grateful that the decision belonged to Telhami, who had no similar hesitations.

“Quraite is guarded land, boy,” Telhami said, not kindly. “Your magic cannot work here. Or anywhere. Escrissar lied to you. He gave you no magic, only delusions.”

“The plants died. They turned to ash and *died*. I saw them!”

“You saw lies, whatever you saw.” Her voice hardened. “And you believed the lies because they spoke to the darkest corner of your heart.” For the third and final time, she ordered, “Take him to my grove.”

The circle of farmers opened, letting Yohan and the stumbling, weeping boy through. Then it sealed again. Ignoring Zvain’s cries, they listened as Telhami described the defense Quraite would mount against Escrissar’s inevitable assault.

Until Zvain’s wails could no longer be heard.

\* \* \*

Quraite had two defenses: the power of its guardian, which only Telhami and Akashia could effectively wield, and the formidable natural barrier of the Sun’s Fist. Plant magic of the sort Zvain had tried to wield could have no effect in the Fist where nothing grew to energize it. Templar spell-craft would work, Pavek suspected, if Escrissar were foolish enough to invoke King Hamanu’s name.

On the other hand, the sorcerer-king might well destroy Quraite once he knew where it was; his power was such that no one, not even Telhami, could stand against him; and without Telhami or another druid to shape and focus it, the guardian’s great power would lie dormant no matter how great the danger.

Pavek doubted that Escrissar would invoke templar spell-craft, and told Telhami so.

“But while the king *might* destroy Quraite,” he concluded, “he *will* destroy Escrissar. The interrogator’s playing both ends against the middle. If what the Moonracers said is true, and Escrissar has sent Laq to Nibenay with Urik’s seal on it, then he’s gone much too far. Hamanu coddles his pets, but he’ll destroy them if they cross him. There’s always someone else waiting to take a favorite’s place. Unless Escrissar’s ingratiated himself with Nibenay’s Shadow-King, the only spellcraft you’ve got to worry about is your own.”

He waited for Telhami’s response. The discussion—reduced to the druid and farmer elders, Yohan and himself—had moved inside her hut. Akashia would’ve been included if she’d had the strength. As it was, she was resting reluctantly in her hut, with a pair of women posted outside her door to see that she stayed there.

Pavek hadn’t been included, either, at least not by invitation; but he hadn’t been told to leave—yet.

“And do you judge it likely that the Lion’s pet would find favor in Nibenay?” Telhami’s hat hung on its peg. She framed her question with a single upward-arching eyebrow. “The kings don’t trust the templars they themselves have raised; they certainly wouldn’t trust a templar another king raised. The Shadow-King could lie as easily to Escrissar as Escrissar lied to Zvain—and abandon him just as easily.”

“You think I was too harsh with him, don’t you?” It was not the response he’d been expecting, not a subject he wanted to consider, especially with witnesses. “I don’t think at all,” he stammered. “I shouldn’t be here ”

“Nonsense. We need to know what you think, and you need to know what I decide. The boy is nothing—part of Escrissar’s villainy. A small but important part through which Escrissar could attack your greatest weakness, and so win Quraite.”

“Weakness?”

“Your humanity, but a weakness nonetheless. Done is done, Pavek, but he won’t reach us through *that* one again. Despite what the boy would have us believe, Escrissar won’t come with magic, and he won’t come with ten thousand men, but he won’t likely come alone, either. For a while, weeds will grow rampant in our fields; you and Yohan will drill our farmers with hoes and flails. We must be ready for an ordinary battle, mustn’t we?”

“It won’t be ordinary, Grandmother,” Yohan interjected. “Escrissar’s a mind-bender. He doesn’t need any help to spew his nightmares.”

“But he does need help to clean up after himself and his nightmares. You deal with those minions. I’ll deal with Escrissar.” Telhami stared past them all. Her lips tightened into a thin smile. “I’ll deal with the interrogator—personally.”

\* \* \*

A kank-back journey from Urik to the guarded lands took four days. Quraite had that long, at a minimum, to prepare for Escrissar’s assault, if they believed Zvain told the truth when he said that his master would come as quickly as he could. And in that matter, at least, no one doubted Zvain’s veracity.

Quraite might have even more time. The more men, weapons, and supplies Escrissar brought with him, the longer it would take to organize the expedition. That was an inescapable fact of military life every templar, regardless of his rank or bureau, well knew. And Escrissar could hardly assemble his supplies in public or march out of the city gates in splendid formation without Hamanu asking questions Escrissar wouldn’t want to answer. Stealth would be required, and stealth took time.

They could have a fifteen-day week before disaster struck. Or much longer. Or less, if Escrissar proved inordinately efficient.

And if Telhami had sent Zvain tumbling before he’d had enough time to reveal the secrets of the Sun’s Fist to Escrissar, as Zvain swore she had,

there was a chance the interrogator would blunder onto the salt flats unaware of their breadth and unprepared for their dangers.

*If* Zvain was telling the truth. In Pavek's opinion, the boy still had ample reason to lie.

Contrary to Telhami's expectations, the guardian had not swallowed Zvain. The boy had already spent five long days and longer nights in Telhami's grove. Cut off from everything familiar, twice-betrayed by Elabon Escrissar—once when the interrogator deceived him into believing he'd doomed himself to a defiler's life, and the second time, a consequence of the first, when his carefully memorized spell had failed to kindle a destructive blast of sorcery—Zvain had spilled tales of his life in House Escrissar as freely as a poorly woven basket leaked water whenever anyone checked to see if he was still alive.

"Everything watches me," Zvain said to Pavek on the morning of his sixth day in the grove. A day when Pavek's increasingly sharp sense of guilt and responsibility had driven him across the barrens to visit the boy at last. "The bugs and the birds, the trees and the stones. Everything. Even the water." The boy's red-rimmed eyes flickered nervously, seeming unable to rest on any one object within the grove. "It all watches me and listens."

Zvain's gaze settled then on him, steady and accusing. "Just like at Escrissar's. No better. Worse, maybe."

And Pavek couldn't forget being faced with that look, clenched fists in the night.

But then the eyes filled, the pleading note returned to the boy's hoarse voice. "How can I make them know I'm sorry, Pavek? Tell Kashi I'm sorry, that I didn't mean it, any of it." And the small fingers sought his own, which clenched back of their own accord. "Please make her believe? There're dead things here, Pavek. I can see them at night and whenever I go to the trees' edge."

The hand trembled with what, he suspected, was very real, fear. Zvain had made himself a lair in the middle of the grove's largest grassland, a small hollow some seven mansized strides across. He was noticeably thinner; the druids' assertion that no one could starve in one of their groves

apparently did not apply to a prisoner too frightened to pick a handful of berries from a bush with eyes. And when those fingers slipped his and Zvain wrapped his arms around Pavek as he had done so often in the Urik bolt-hole, Pavek found he couldn't refuse to offer the comfort so obviously needed.

"It's not my fault, Pavek, is it? I was looking for you when he found me. He locked me up, just like this, and then he gave me things—I tried to be careful Pavek, I thought he was a slaver, but he was worse, and then it was too late." Zvain's arms squeezed harder. "You've got to believe me. You've got to get me out of here."

Pavek knelt to return Zvain's embrace, and as the boyish arms wrapped around his neck and the boyish head burrowed into his neck, he found himself wondering why it was easier to hug and hold someone he didn't trust than to comfort Akashia, whom he did. Even now, when tears were soaking his shirt and trickling down his ribs, why should he want to reassure the boy when he knew, both in his head and his heart, that Telhami was right? It was a tragedy when an innocent youth was corrupted, but that didn't mean that the corruption should be spared its rightful end.

He, himself, had lived in corruption all his life without succumbing to it—or so both Oelus and Telhami said. Of course, no one had ever tempted him the way Escrissar had tempted Zvain, or abandoned him quite the way he had abandoned the boy. And Zvain was his weak point, the only opening a man like Escrissar needed.

He extracted himself from Zvain's embrace.

"Please, Pavek? Please?" The whine was back; Zvain reattached himself around Pavek's ribs. "Don't leave me here. Take me with you. *Make* them forgive me—like you made them forgive Ruari after he busted the zarneeka stowaway."

And how had Zvain learned that?

He pushed the boy away, scowling. Zvain made no attempt to reattach, seemingly resigned to losing this battle, but threw himself instead back onto his lair and scowled up at him.

Was Ruari paying visits to the grove? It was possible. Ruari held himself apart from the farmers and druids who drilled twice every day, trying to transform themselves and their tools into fighters and weapons. Ruari wanted *personal* instruction from both him and Yohan and the assurance that he wouldn't be standing in a line of hoe-toting farmers, but doing hand-to-hand hero's work; an assurance neither he nor Yohan would give. And knowing a bit of the way Ruari's mind worked, it was more than possible that he was sulking in Telhami's grove rather than his own.

Ruari and Zvain together in the same thought sent a shiver down Pavek's back.

The youths were talking, perhaps plotting. Telling himself that he'd have to warn Yohan, if not Telhami, he turned his back on the scowling face.

"You risked your life to save a farmer's brat." The voice from behind him had taken on a new maturity in the past six days, one he could hear, now with his back turned. "You defied that old woman to save a half-elf that tried to kill you; but you won't say a word in my behalf-me, who saved your life, templar, after you took my mother's... And *left* me behind."

He almost turned, then, to defend actions he couldn't explain to himself, but:

"Why, Pavek?" The whine was gone, and the maturity, leaving only a soft quiver.

A quiver far more dangerous to all he fought for than all Escrissar's unknown forces. Pavek pried himself free of Zvain's insidious influence and made a clean escape to the barren land outside Telhami's grove.

He was still on the path between the fields when he heard frantic hammering on the hollowed log that served as Quraite's general alarm.

\* \* \*

Most of Quraite had assembled by Telhami's hut by the time he got there. Telhami herself stood beside the door, waiting. Her gray hair stood

out from her head in windswept wisps, and her eyes were weepy from the sun.

In the last few days, Pavek had heard her say many times that she watched over Quraite. He remembered how she'd been the first to know that Yohan was crossing the Fist, first to know that Pavek and his companions were returning with her and Zvain; but he'd assumed that she'd used some trick of the Unseen Way to accomplish that. He'd never guessed, until now, that she literally and actually hovered above her guarded lands.

"They're coming," she said, flatly and firmly. "From the southwest, straight out of Urik."

"All ten thousand?" an anxious farmer asked.

"Fifty men and women, give or take a handful. They've lost some coming across the Fist, but those I saw will finish the journey before sundown."

Fifty sounded better than ten thousand. The farmers sighed with relief, but Pavek didn't. He thought of fifty fighters, probably including Rokka and other renegades from the Urik templarate, and shook his head grimly.

Any templar could take battlefield commands and carry them out. And even a desk-bound procurer like Rokka had to put in his time on the practice fields.

Pavek held himself a competent fighter with the weapons he knew—better than competent, his size, strength and Dovanne's sword would give him a real advantage. But when the fighting was between one man and many, the wise man placed his bets on the many.

He didn't think Escrissar could have recruited fifty renegades in Urik; Hamanu's grip was firm, and his vengeance swift. He thought ten templars was a more reasonable number, with the rest hired rabble from the elven market, only marginally more skilled than the farmers who'd have the morale advantage of fighting for their home and their lives. The odds would still be long, but, if Telhami could contain Escrissar's mind-bending, they'd have a chance.

Yohan had made his own analysis of what they faced:

“They’ll be parched and exhausted. Maybe they’ll make camp.” And his eyes sparkled with thoughts of an ambush. Telhami looked at Pavek.

He shook his head. “Unless it’s so dark they don’t see the trees.”

“My thought as well,” she agreed.

She took a long moment to study the Quraiters, one by one, looking straight into each pair of eyes with a confident smile. “We’ve done everything that we could do in advance,” she said. “You know what we must do now, and I know that you can do it.”

Pavek admitted to himself that for a woman who’d spent her life growing trees, Telhami did a credible job of marshalling her forces for what she, at least, had to know was going to be an all-out, to-the-last-survivor battle. His own confidence rose as he watched the farmers and lesser druids gather the long-handled tools that would serve as their weapons. Calmly determined, they laid the hoes, flails, scythes and rakes beside their stations along the waist-high dirt rampart that encircled Telhami’s hut.

In six days they had transformed the village from a cluster of comfortable dwellings and pantries to a bare ground clearing in which they had hastily created three trench-and-rampart rings. They’d hacked stakes from the sacrificed trees and homes and set the largest point-up in the outer bank of the first two ramparts to slow the enemies’ advance. Smaller stakes had become make-shift spears heaped in sheaves at each station of the innermost rampart.

The farmers and druids, everyone old enough to fling a stick or bind a length of cloth over a wound, would fight from behind the third ring’s rampart, while he and Yohan would add their skills wherever, whenever the circle threatened to break.

And while they were holding back the physical attack, inside the hut Akashia would be shaping and focusing the guardian’s power as Telhami combined druidry and the tricks of the Unseen Way to fend off whatever Escrissar sent at them.

And if they failed—if the circle broke and the enemy stormed Telhami’s hut, or Escrissar got around Telhami and; the guardian to flood

them all with nightmare monsters... Well, every druid had wrought unique spellcraft to hide his or her grove. Escrissar would be hard-put to locate them all, and if he found them, the likelihood was that the zarneeka plants, and everything else the Quraite druids had nurtured for generations, would be dead.

It was as good a defense strategy as they'd collectively been able to devise. Pavek would have given all the gold stashed beneath Telhami's hut for a few bows and the men to shoot them, but there was no sense longing for what they couldn't have. Escrissar and his fifty allies would march undisturbed through the fields and the ring of trees and find an unpleasant surprise waiting for them.

Pavek only hoped the wheel of fate would give him just one opportunity to slip his sword between the interrogator's ribs.

He felt a tug on his shirt and spun around.

"What about me, Pavek?"

Ruari, with his staff.

"You know your place."

"Pavek, I can do better than that—"

"You can't. Gather your weapons, your water, and the cloth for bandages. Take them and yourself to your place on the rampart and *stay there!*"

"I want to fight"

"You're going to fight, scum. Now—*Go!*"

He and Ruari stared at each other, then Ruari stalked away. Pavek hoped-prayed to whatever nameless power might listen to a one-time templar, not-quite druid—that Ruari's bile wouldn't get him killed in the first assault wave. Quraite needed everyone, and Ruari was proficient with that staff of his; he set the standard for the farmers around him. They'd lose heart if Ruari went down in some fool's burst of bravery.

*He'd lose heart.*

Except for Yohan, none of them were veterans, none of them had fought a pitched battle—including himself. Stalking Dovanne's attacker or breaking the heads of petty criminals in his inspector days didn't count. The closest he'd come to combat was skirmishes on the streets of Urik against the Tyrian hooligans years ago.

Inside, he was scared to the marrow and desperate to see another sunrise. He almost envied Ruari his blind anger and commitment.

Waiting was worse than he imagined it could be, knowing that the circle fighters were looking over their shoulders at him and curbing their fears because he looked calm. Yohan, sitting beside him on the stoop of Telhami's hut, looked calm as he examined the edge of his obsidian sword.

But maybe, as Yohan's eyes met his, not calm at all. Maybe Yohan's panic went even deeper, because there was no one at all for him to turn to.

Then, without warning, the mind-bending began: a black fist thrusting through his mind. Everyone jerked backward; a few cried out in shock or terror before Telhami launched her counterattack, and the black fist became a memory.

"He knows we're here, waiting for him." Yohan got to his feet and stretched the dwarf-thick muscles of his arms and legs. "May Rkard guide your sword." He held out his hand. "What do yellow-robe scum say to each other before the Lion sends them out to die?"

Pavek slapped his hand against Yohan's and pulled himself to his feet. "Better you than me." Which was a lie. He had no idea what templars said to each other.

But Yohan laughed and shook his hand heartily. "That's good. I'll remember that."

"See that you do."

They released each other's hand and took a step backward toward the quadrants of the circle they'd selected for themselves. For a moment Pavek wanted to say something more, something sincere, then Yohan turned away and the moment was gone.

\* \* \*

Escrissar brought his force through the trees in a compact group: a dozen fighters in the front rank and three or four in each of the files. If Telhami's estimate of their enemy's strength was correct—and Pavek saw no reason to doubt it—the interrogator was committing himself personally to a single thrust and holding nothing in reserve.

On second glance, the *interrogator* wasn't committing *himself* to anything, unless he was the black-haired half-elf marching second-from-the-left. There wasn't a black enamel mask to be seen, like Telhami and Akashia, Escrissar was holding himself out of the battle, mind-bending from a safe distance.

And that wasn't the worst thing Pavek saw, or didn't see. He spotted Rokka and a few other templars he recognized from Urik, about ten in all, just as he'd figured. They'd left their yellow robes behind—no surprise; heavy sleeves were a dangerous obstacle to a swinging sword-arm—and marched in such oddments of weaponry and armor as they'd scrounged from the templarate armory and private armorers in the elven market. Their rag-tag panoply stood in considerable contrast with the fighters who marched around them.

Escrissar had filled his force not with the ill-equipped rabble from the market he'd hoped for, but with some three dozen hardened fighters, each of whom carried a polished wooden shield, a javelin, and a yard-long knobkerrie club all carved from bronze-hard agafari wood.

The agafari tree grew near Nibenay, and, as far as Pavek knew, no where else in the Tablelands. Nibenay's templarate was composed of the Shadow-King's wives only, so he was either looking at army conscripts—which didn't seem likely given the way they marched—or one of the numerous mercenary companies Nibenay's ruler employed to augment his harem.

But whether the Shadow-King knew that his mercenaries were here, far northeast of Urik, was a question only Elabon Escrissar could answer.

Nibenay's mercenaries threw their single javelin before they descended into the trench around the outer rampart. Two farmers went down. One took a shaft through his left arm; he might recover from the shock to fight again. The other was gut-struck, and his screams were horrible to hear.

While the Quraiters hurled their first and second sharpened-stake volley, Yohan pulled every other fighter from that part of the inner circle that did not face the attack and repositioned them in the quadrant that did.

Agafari shields easily deflected those few stakes of the first Quraite volleys that were well-aimed and forceful, deflected as well the stakes of the third and fourth. Pavek hadn't expected the stakes to inflict much damage, except, perhaps, to the enemies' resolve. And perhaps they would have, if the bulk of Escrissar's force had been rabble from the elven market. But the Nibenay mercenaries were laughing as they came over the outer rampart.

With luck—a monumental amount of luck—that laughter would make them careless.

He chose a place where the right flank of mercenaries would come against the inner rampart and hurled javelins himself, aiming for the Urik templars who lacked shields. He got one, too, square in the neck. She went down and a loud cheer went up from the Quraiters.

A shrieking, blood-red streak momentarily blinded Pavek, whether in the sky or in his mind's eye, he couldn't have said. His vision cleared in an instant and the apparition wasn't repeated, but it wasn't a good omen, either, if Akashia and Telhami could be so easily distracted.

But the enemy's front rank was atop the second rampart, now, and no longer laughing. Pavek shouted for the Quraiters to take up their hand weapons. One druid, already so unnerved that she couldn't move to attack or defend, was doomed, if she didn't recover quickly. But her fate was hers to call; the Nibenay mercenaries in the second rank of the outside file charged forward, wailing the Shadow-King's war-cry, and for Pavek, the battle had begun in earnest.

There was nothing skilled or subtle to his fighting, just beat or parry—with the flat of his sword when he could, because the agafari wood was

more resilient than his steel and apt to bind the blade if he struck it edge-on—and attack whenever he could.

He tried to grab himself a shield after taking his first attacker down with a bone-deep slash to the man's thigh, but the mercenaries had anchored their shields around their necks with leather thongs. Pavek only had time for a single-syllable curse before a man and a woman bearing the weapons of Nibenay surged toward him.

He beat aside both clubs, then fell back a quick half-step to survey the battle. He had room to fight only because the Quraiters around him were down and dying. The circle still held, but there were far more bodies on the inside of the rampart than on the outside.

They'd been outnumbered almost two to one from the start, and with Escrissar's foreign fighters, it was more like ten to one.

But the female mercenary—a human: all the Nibenay mercenaries seemed to be human—left him no time to consider options. Following his retreat, she swung her club, a two-handed whirling blow that, had it landed, would have taken him out. But Pavek pushed forward into her unguarded attack, and over-balancing her, got a clean, backhand cut at her neck as she went down, insuring that she'd stay down. The other mercenary, undoubtedly her partner, came at him in blind rage.

At that same moment, a cry went up from the other end—Yohan's end—of the battle. The cries weren't cheers, and he could only hope the dwarf hadn't been wounded, or worse, gone down completely, but a numbing blow to his off-weapon arm jolted his attention back to more immediate concerns.

He got lucky, catching the mercenary's weapon hand above the wrist. The man dropped his club and ran screaming toward the trees. There was a five-heartbeat pause in the battling: long enough for him to reach down and pick up a club since he'd given up all hope of getting a shield.

*“Yohan's dead!”*

The tidings he'd dreaded, delivered by the voice he wanted least to hear.

“Hold the line!” he shouted, not daring to turn around as a Urikite templar—an instigator whose face he recognized—came forward to join battle with him.

“We can’t! Not without Yohan. What do we do? Everyone’s hurt. Pavék!”

He parried quickly, using the edge against an obsidian weapon that chipped against the harder steel.

“Help us, Pavék! We’re losing!”

Fear touched Pavék’s heart then, a cold, shivery tracing—and he would have died himself if Ruari hadn’t thrust his staff between them and spun the thrust aside, exposing the instigator’s flank long enough for Pavék to pierce it with the sword. As the templar fell, his medallion slipped from beneath his shirt.

Medallion. And Ruari had his.

“Give it to me!” Pavék dropped the club and reached across the body toward Ruari.

“Give what?”

“My medallion. Give it to me!”

“*What?*”

“You said it, scum: We’ve lost. That medallion is all we’ve got left.”

The flow of combat had swung away from them, toward the place where Yohan no longer offered solid resistance. Pavék scrambled down the rampart, heedless of what lay beneath his feet. Ruari kept pace with him, his staff-wielding more effective than any shield. They disabled three Nibenay mercenaries in quick succession, but the tide of the battle didn’t change.

Escrissar’s force would be over the rampart at any moment.

“Now!” Pavék shouted above the din of weapons striking and men screaming.

True to form, the half-wit scum *threw* the medallion without warning.

Pavek caught the thong on a fingertip, and didn't allow himself to think about what might have been. He spun the inix leather around his left hand and closed his fist around the familiar ceramic lump, shouted *Guard me!* and raised his wrapped fist high above his head:

*“Hamanu! Hear me, your servant, O Great and Mighty One!”*

Everyone in Escrissar's force heard Pavek's cry and surged toward him. Ruari would have gone down in a pair of heartbeats once they closed, but the remaining Quraiters, though they couldn't have understood what he was trying to do, saw Ruari defending him and rushed to their aid.

The fighting was fierce and desperate around him. Pavek felt a sharp pain in his leg; then it went completely numb: the telltale sign of a serious wound. But the leg held, and he prayed as he'd never prayed before to see a pair of sulphurous eyes in the lurid sunset sky.

Shimmering ovals glowed faintly overhead: the distance between Urik and Quraite was considerable, even for a sorcerer-king.

Who knew what Hamanu saw when a templar invoked his name and power? Another sorcerer-king would know; certainly not Pavek, though he hoped Urik's ruler would see the agafari weapons of Nibenay creating carnage in *his* domain. And Pavek hoped Great and Mighty Hamanu, having seen that, would give a renegade templar one great and mighty spell...

*“Flamestrike!”*

*...Granted...*

The shimmering eyes flared like nearby suns, all seething reds and oranges. The air over the Quraite ramparts thickened and became very still before a wind began to blow upward from the ground itself. Will they or nil they, the men and women on both sides of the rampart lowered their weapons to stare at the sky. Urik templars, recognizing what they saw, ran for the trees—much too slowly.

A flaming bolt exploded from the sky. It grounded itself in the medallion Pavek still held above his head. Searing heat and pain beyond imagining transformed him. He thought he would surely die—thought

Hamanu had chosen to destroy him first—but he did not even lose consciousness as lesser fire-bolts arced away from the inferno erupting at his wrist. The bolts struck true into the hearts of Escrissar’s allies, and into them alone.

Howls that would haunt Pavék’s sleep until he died escaped those living—*dying*—torches, which continued to burn erect even after they fell silent, until their substance was completely consumed and nothing, not even ash, remained.

Then, abruptly, the great gout of flame rising from his wrist fizzled. Heat and pain were reduced to memories; his flesh was unmarked and whole. The medallion shone with its own light for another instant before it, too, reverted to an ordinary ceramic lump.

Pavék lowered his arm.

“It’s over,” someone whispered, and someone else cheered.

But it wasn’t over. A scream out of Telhami’s hut scattered the last remaining wits of the surviving Quraiters. Pavék crossed from the rampart to the hut in two leaps—remembering his wound only when he’d landed solidly on the threshold on a leg that should have collapsed.

A blackened weal ran from knee to hip along his thigh. The spell, he thought, though how a flamestrike spell had cauterized the gash and sewn up the muscles beneath it went beyond *his* knowledge of magic. His leg ached when he thought about it, but he knew better than to think about it twice, and swept aside the curtain-door.

Telhami had collapsed on her sleeping platform. Her eyes and mouth were closed, but her limbs sprawled at awkward and unmoving angles. She was unconscious at the least, and very likely dead. Akashia sat alone, now, weaving her hands randomly over an assortment of herbs and powders. Her face was twisted into a silent scream as she sought to both shape the guardian’s power and maintain the mind-bending spells Telhami had begun.

Quraites’s most dangerous enemy, Elabon Escrissar, still lurked somewhere in the guarded lands, apparently unscathed by King Hamanu’s bounty.

“Ruari!” Pavek shouted. “Get in here!”

The half-elf appeared at his side, battered, bleeding, and filthy, but still on his feet. He glanced under Pavek’s arms and—for once—needed no instructions. He pressed his palms against Akashia’s moving hands before he settled on the floor.

“Hold steady, scum. You’ll know when I’ve found him.”

\* \* \*

The interrogator could be almost anywhere. He wasn’t within the tree circle around the village, and he wasn’t among the trees themselves; Pavek tramped through the fields, to the line where Escrissar’s allies had hobbled their kanks, but Escrissar wasn’t there, either.

He looked until the sun was setting, the lavender sky turning to violet, and still he searched, until the only light was that of the stars. A half-elf couldn’t see in the dark as well as a full-blooded elf, but still Escrissar would see better than Pavek.

The mind-bending interrogator *should* be nearly exhausted. Akashia and Ruari *should* be able to hold against him. But *should* be didn’t always mean was, and in his heart Pavek felt fortune swinging away from Quraite again.

“Hamanu’s infinitesimal mercy,” he whispered, not an invocation, but a simple man’s simple oath. The medallion hung around his neck again but he had no intention of using it. There was no spell in any of the scrolls he’d memorized that would guide him to Escrissar.

Then he heard sounds behind him, a heavy-footed tread, crushing the ripening grain as his own feet crushed grass in the groves. Drawing the sword, he spun around to face a silhouette half again his height and watching him with glowing yellow eyes.

“Hamanu?” Pavek whispered, then, realizing it could be no one else, dropped to his knees and threw his sword away. “O Great and Mighty King —”

“My pet is in the wastes yonder. You may follow.”

The ground gave around him as King Hamanu strode past Pavek. No one knew the sorcerer-king’s true aspect, if he had one. Tonight he was the Lion of Urik, dressed in golden armor and crowned with a mane of golden hair. A sword as long as a man’s leg hung from his waist, but it was the sharp, curved claws he flexed with each step that froze Pavek’s heart in his throat.

He followed, retrieving his own sword along the way and taking two strides for every one of the king’s until they came to a dark low-crouching figure.

“Recount!” Hamanu demanded.

It was more than a simple command. Pavek’s skull felt as if it had exploded, and he was, most definitely, not the king’s target. Not yet.

Escrissar scrabbled across the ground, a scavenger surprised by a true predator. “I have found the source of Laq,” he babbled, as if any mortal could lie successfully to a sorcerer-king.

“Ambition has blighted your imagination, my pet. You bore me.”

Hamanu’s voice was as weary as his clawed hand was swift. He seized Escrissar by the neck and, lifting him off the ground, began to squeeze. The interrogator struggled wildly, then hung limp, but the king was not finished. By the light of the Lion-King’s golden eyes, Pavek watched in nauseous horror as Hamanu’s fist squeezed ever tighter. The bones in Escrissar’s neck snapped and crumbled; gore flowed from his lifeless mouth and nostrils.

And still Hamanu was not finished with his former favorite. He cast a spell the color of his eyes that wrapped itself around the interrogator’s corpse and, layer by layer, from black robes to white bones, consumed it.

When there was nothing left, the yellow eyes found Pavek on his knees again and trying heroically not to be sick.

“I have need of a High Templar. Follow me.”

The king headed for the village.

Pavek found his feet, somehow, and followed.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Fires had been lit in the hearths within the village's inner rampart. A bright, crackling fire made any night seem safer—except when the flickering light reflected on Hamanu of Urik as he strode through the trees. Pavek, hard pressed to stay within ten human paces of the sorcerer-king, had neither the time nor the energy to call out a warning. Besides, nothing prepared anyone for the Lion: breathtakingly handsome in his golden armor, radiant with arcane power, cruel and terrible beyond mortal measure. After a day of loss and triumph, a handful of Quraiters simply swooned at the sight. The rest wisely dropped to their knees.

The king paused by a fire to survey this previously hidden part of his domain and its quaking inhabitants. Pavek caught up with him.

“Where is she?” Hamanu asked. “Where is Telhami?”

Not *Who rules here?* or some question of that sort, which Pavek had expected, but *Where is Telhami?* because, inexplicably, the Lion already knew who ruled Quraite. If he lived another day, Pavek promised himself he'd think through all the implications of this discovery, but for the moment—because those sulphur eyes were focused on him—he answered plainly:

“In there.” And pointed to Telhami's hut.

Hamanu's head rose above the roof-beam. His shoulders were wider than the doorway. Pavek held his breath, waiting for the king to call Telhami by name, fearing what he would do if she could not answer. But Hamanu solved his problems on his terms. He pierced the hut's reed walls with his claws, seized the support poles and lifted the entire structure over his head before tossing it over the inner and middle rampart. His size was no longer a problem.

Akashia and Ruari were held motionless in panic, both looking up, slack-jawed, from the length of linen cloth they'd wrapped around Telhami's corpse. Hamanu motioned them aside with a small gesture from his huge, clawed hand, and they hastened to obey. Telhami lay in repose on

her sleeping platform, arms folded over her breast, thin gray hair spread across a linen pillow. Remembering what the king had done with Escrissar, Pavek dreaded what he might do with her.

Then the rightly feared ruler of Urik sank to one knee. While Pavek watched with the others, clawed fingers curled around Telhami's cheek so gently that her translucent parchment skin was not creased.

"Telhami?"

Pavek had thought she was dead, but she opened her eyes and, after a moment, smiled. It seemed that not only did King Hamanu know Telhami, she knew him, and not as an adversary.

"So—" the king began, "*this* is Quraite."

Telhami's smile deepened with evident pride, but she said nothing. Perhaps she couldn't speak, or move. Her hands seemed waxen in the light.

"It has seen better days, I think. Don't you?"

There was a moment's pause, then Hamanu laughed, an incandescent sound that echoed lightly from the trees.

"But I *was* invited!"

The king extended his hand toward Pavek, who reluctantly came closer. When he was in range, Hamanu ran a clawed finger down Pavek's neck, hard enough that he could feel its strength and sharpness, but not—he thought—hard enough to break the skin. That, he was certain, would come later, after the king had toyed with him and tired of his fear.

"I never grow tired of fear, Pavek," King Hamanu assured him with a grin that revealed glistening fangs. "Never." Then he hooked the inix leather thong of Pavek's templar medallion, which the king withdrew into the firelight. "A regulator of the civil bureau." A claw gouged through the marks that indicated Pavek's rank, effectively eliminating him from that rank and that bureau. Hamanu let the defaced, but intact, medallion thump against Pavek's breast-bone, in effect proclaiming that he was a templar without a formal rank: a High Templar, if he ever chose to claim that distinction. "The best always slip away, Pavek. Remember that."

And for a moment Hamanu seemed—he could not possibly *be*—less a leonine sorcerer-king with sulphur eyes and more a man, an ordinary man with clear brown eyes and a face a woman—Telhami—might find attractive.

Then King Hamanu turned back to the sleeping platform.

“Come back with me, Telhami. It’s not too late. Athas has changed. Borys is gone; the stalemate is broken. Nothing is as it was, Telhami. For the first time in a millennium, I do not know what will happen after I wake up. Come back to Urik—”

He fell silent and remained that way until Telhami closed her eyes. Then he stood up with a sigh of disappointment and age creaking in his bones. “Hold them tight or set them free, they always slip away. Always,” he said to no one in particular and stared at the moons.

“Was this your plan?” the king asked suddenly, his private rumination ended and, apparently, forgotten.

Pavek, at whom the question had been directed, was, at first, too startled to answer. When the shock faded, a single word hung in his mind: “Yohan.”

But Yohan wasn’t there to take the credit for his concentric ramparts. Yohan was gone, and Pavek did not feel better that he was alive instead.

“They die, Pavek. They slip away when your eye’s on something else, and you can never get them back. Learn to live with it. Think of them as flowers: a day’s delight and then they die. You’ll die yourself if you care about them.”

Then King Hamanu walked out through the ramparts, through the trees, and into the night.

Pavek’s gaze hadn’t left the place where he’d disappeared when he felt an arm slip around his back. Silently, Akashia rested her head against his chest. Hesitantly—he didn’t think such things would ever seem easy to him—Pavek put his hand on her neck and soothed the knotted muscles he found there.

\* \* \*

Quraite took a final count of its losses the next day when the sun rose. More than half the adults had died fighting on the ramparts. A dozen groves would languish, unless strangers were drawn quickly across the salt flats or farmers who'd been content with the simple magic of green sprouting through broken ground began to hear the wilder call of druidry. Most of the children—the future—had survived. Akashia took them to her grove where they gathered wild-flowers to place on the shrouds of those who would never see the sun again.

Sprigs of yellow and lavender adorned Yohan's shroud, where Pavek stood throughout the morning. *Friend*, Oelus had said; Yohan was a friend. Friendship was stronger than flowers. It seemed to Pavek—though he'd never thought about it before—that a man, especially a dwarf, should take something more than flowers into the ground with him. He found Dovanne's steel sword and placed it over the flower sprigs.

Out beyond the fields the farmers had dug a common grave where, with Pavek's help, they carried the remains of Quraite's dead. Akashia said the simple words of remembrance and peace. Each Quraite who survived threw a shovelful of dirt into the hole. Pavek stayed with the men to finish the task. When they returned to the village center, a procession was ready to carry Telhami to her grove one last time.

Pavek suspected she didn't need a half-dozen people to carry the bier they'd made from her sleeping platform across the barren land. She was light enough he could have carried her himself. Moreover, though it was clear that she was dying, she wasn't dead. Her mind was as sharp as it had ever been. He was certain she could have invoked the guardian with no difficulty at all and whisked herself to her grove in the blink of an eye.

He heard laughter while that thought still circulated inside his head.

*They need to fed needed and useful.*

Shifting his hold on the platform, Pavek looked over at her face. Her eyes were closed; nothing had moved. Nothing would move. But it was

Telhami, he was certain, speaking directly into his mind.

*Of course it is, Just-Plain Pavek. Have you made your decision?*

“What decision?” he said aloud, drawing the puzzled stares of his companions.

*Your future. The Lion has made you a handsome offer. I know; I took it once. Hamanu would not have ruled for a millennium if all his favorites were like Elabon Escrissar.*

Telhami’s words pressed against Pavek’s consciousness; he couldn’t absorb them. He’d hung his life around certain assumptions. What Telhami said didn’t truly threaten those assumptions. He’d known somewhere, deep within himself, that Urik could not have survived if King Hamanu was not as wise as he was cruel, if his templatate was uniformly depraved and rapacious. But she’d drawn pathways between his assumptions, and he was not ready to walk down them.

*Then, decide to stay in Quraite.*

She was in his thoughts. He shook his head vigorously to dislodge her, and once again drew stares.

A man was entitled to *some* privacy!

Laughter, followed by: *You aren’t sure, are you? Urik’s your home.*

His home. He remembered what he felt when he stood beside House Escrissar with his hands pressed against the rough plaster. Kashi, of course: her anguish, his desire, and more than that—the surging power of Urik, seething with life and passion, like the Lion-King’s eyes.

The essence of the ancient city. A guardian.

*That* gave his Unseen eavesdropper a flashing moment of surprise. So—there were some things even Telhami didn’t know.

*Many things, Just-Plain Pavek. Many things. I do not know what happened to the halfling alchemist. Do you?*

He didn’t, though he remembered that scarred face with its hate-filled eyes very well. There’d been half-elves among Escrissar’s allies, but no halflings, and Escrissar, himself had been alone when Hamanu found him.

Perhaps the Lion-King had absorbed the interrogator's memories when he absorbed his essence. Perhaps the problem had already been solved with the king's customary thoroughness.

*Not likely. The Lion does not notice the grass 'til it's grown high enough to scratch his eyes.*

"I must go back—"

More stares, and the realization that the trees of Telhami's grove loomed close ahead.

*Is that your decision?*

Was it? Pavek asked himself. Was he ready to turn his back on Quraite? On Akashia who—without saying a word, had, last night, asked him to stay? On Ruari—?

*Who will keep him in line, if you're not here to do it? Maybe Quraite is also your home?*

"I don't know," Pavek whispered as the grass of Telhami's grove began to brush against his legs.

He stumbled when the procession came to an unexpected stop. Craning his neck to one side, peering around the heads in front of him, he spotted a thin, wiry arm and a patch of wild dark hair blocking their way.

Zvain, he thought with guilt and shame, which Telhami echoed. They'd forgotten their prisoner, the misguided, betrayed, and abandoned orphan whose parents' death had brought so many consequences to them all. Especially Akashia at the procession's head. Pavek imagined the looks that had passed between them as Zvain raced away. Belatedly, he noticed that the boy's shirt was in tatters.

*It would not have been pleasant for him here yesterday.*

The procession started forward again—without Pavek.

He couldn't imagine what the grove had been like yesterday when Telhami and Escrissar had dueled with nightmares as the skies darkened. When Telhami, apologetically—or so it seemed—offered him a glimpse of the horror and carnage, he backed away from the bier.

“He’s a boy! A child.” He continued his retreat, heedless of the branches whipping against him. “Everybody stood back and watched. What would he do? How would he grow? What mistakes would he make to doom himself? The Veil wouldn’t take him. Oelus wouldn’t take him. *I* left him behind. So Escrissar took him, lied to him, and turned him loose again. Who made the mistakes? We didn’t even come out here to tell him who *won* —”

Pavek could see everyone now, from Akashia in the lead to the druid who’d taken his place carrying the bier. None of them would answer his questions or meet his eyes. None except Ruari who, Pavek realized suddenly, had no reason to hang his head and every reason of his own to glower.

Then Akashia raised her head. “Come back, Pavek. Come with us to the pool. You’re one of us. You’re a druid now. Please? Don’t run away!”

But he did just that, turning and running to the hollow where he’d found the boy before.

Zvain was there all right, sitting in the grass, contemplating his toes.

“Go away!”

“I’m sorry, Zvain. I’m just a yellow-robe third-rank regulator at heart and I can’t say it any better than mat. I’m sorry you got left here yesterday. I’m sorry your mother died. You must have loved her, and she must have loved you—’cause you’re not bad, Zvain. You didn’t deserve any of this. And I’m sorry.”

The boy plucked and shredded a blade of grass.

Pavek sat down on his knees. There were ugly scratches on Zvain’s back and arms to match the tears in his shirt. Pavek was careful where he touched when he put his arm around the boy and pulled him closer.

“I’m sorry. No one can give you back what you’ve lost, or take away the memories. But it will get better. I promise you that. All Athas is changing. We can make it change for the better. Here or in Urik. Together.”

Zvain let his breath out with a shudder and a sigh, then he molded himself against Pavek’s arms. They were silent a long while. Pavek felt

Telhami looking at them from the trees, a part of her grove now and forever.

“Where do you want to go?” he asked when his knees had, at last, grown numb. “Do you want to stay here, or go back to Urik?”

“Right here?” Zvain raised his head with horror. “Everything *watches* here.”

Pavek thought of Telhami all around them and chuckled softly to himself. “Not right here. In Quraite, with the druids.”

“Akashia hates me.”

He had no easy response for that. “Akashia’s not the only druid in Quraite. I’ll be here and—” *fate forgive me for saying it aloud* “—Ruari.”

“Ru said he’d teach me what the elves know, and show me his kivits...”

In his mind’s eye, Pavek saw the two of them, Ruari and Zvain, and whether it was brawling with the elves, or playing with the kivits, the images were pleasant and warmed his heart.

“We’ll stay, then, for a while. I’ve got to go to Urik sometime—I’ve got to find that halfling alchemist—”

“Kakzim. His name is Kakzim. He and Escrissar had a fight, and he went back to the forests.”

Pavek ruffled the dark, curly hair. “You’ll have to come with me. I can see I’ll need your help.”

Zvain smiled, then buried his face in Pavek’s shirt as he hugged him with all his strength.

*You ran a fine race, all the way to the end. Your gambits played well; you’ve won it all, Just-Plain Pavek. Take care of yourself, now that the race is over. Take care of him and the others. Take care of my grove; I give it to you. Learn to run wild and free before you return to the city.*